MR. BEKE
OF THE BLACKS

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MR. BEKE OF THE BLACKS

BY

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AUTHOR OF "MAROTZ"

LONDON

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To

HIS MOTHER

THE AUTHOR INSCRIBES

THIS BOOK

WITH MORE LOVE AND RESPECT

THAN IT BEHOVES HIM TO SPEAK OF HERE

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Mr. Beke, of the Blacks was written over ten years ago, and in the course of the year 1899 was offered to *Temple Bar* magazine, in which it ultimately appeared.

The story being too short to last out, as leading serial, a whole year, the Editor still further shortened it, that it might not be too long for a half-year serial.

The book is now printed from the original MS., without revision or improvement.

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MR. BEKE, OF THE BLACKS

CHAPTER I

No doubt Mr. Beke[1] represented a type, but it was one of the less ordinary military types and entirely unlike the soldier of fiction, who has taken the place of the soldier of fortune on our bookstalls.

Nothing could be less like "Bootles," for instance (whose baby one has heard quite as much of as the subject merits), than Mr. Osric Beke, of the Black Northumberland Borderers. Nor was Mr. Beke without many points of difference from the ordinary officer of his standing (he was only a subaltern, of course) whom one really does meet in ante-rooms and in the military clubs in town.

He had not entered the Army from the nursery, as his maternal grandfather Lord Brailham of the Malakoff had done; indeed, that distinguished general had led an assault

[1] *Beke* rhymes with *neck*.

years before he had learned that there ought to be a *u* in it. Whereas his grandson had led nothing yet, except after winning a trick, and had never made a mistake in spelling since he had gone to Eton.

Mr. Beke had never been to a crammer's; but he had been to Oxford, and the flavour of his university training would never leave him, and was impossible to be overlooked.

Some of his critics were apt to declare that Beke would never quite make a soldier, by which they, unconsciously, meant that he would always be likely to remain principally a gentleman.

All those who hold His Majesty's commission in the Army are "officers and gentlemen"; but it is a double qualification, and implies a perfectly different person from the mere gentleman of ordinary civil life. Whether there be any superiority, and, if so, to which side it leans, the present writer does not feel disposed to inquire. Mr. Beke would certainly have been a gentleman whether he had become an officer or not; but he occasionally met others of his trade concerning whom he was inclined to doubt if that would have been the case. He kept his doubts to himself, but they had a large influence on his conduct; for Mr. Beke was notably particular in the choice of his friends.

His manners were especially good, as was natural, for he came of a family that was hardly more polite to strangers than it was within doors; and Mr. Beke was accustomed to pay considerable attention to his manners. His scrupulous care on this point was partly prudential, for it seemed to him that the chances of encountering anything like rudeness himself must be immensely reduced by a constant strict observance of politeness to others. He looked upon good manners as an admirable outwork of one's own *amour propre*.

Even when intimate, therefore, Mr. Beke seldom dropped into familiarity. And his intimacies were few and apt to be slow and rather reluctant.

At first it had seemed as though he were never to know anybody in the regiment, but that was only because the young man thought it well to take a few observations before allowing himself to be drawn into any close acquaintances that might, if rashly entered upon, have to be abandoned. It was the new-comer who held aloof, not his immediate seniors in the regiment.

They were mostly, in point of age, if anything rather younger than himself, and none of them having been at Oxford, or in the same Militia with himself, they were chiefly strangers. One,

however, Hubert Fane, lived in the same square in London as Sir Lionel Beke, and the families had known each other slightly for years.

Young Beke by no means considered that this fact necessitated an immediate friendship, now, between Bertie Fane and himself. And it was quite characteristic of Osric that he set about his quiet observation of his brother officers without seeking any guidance from the only one of them whom he knew previously. Occasionally Fane volunteered his opinions on the subject, but the other young man was not much inclined to attach any importance to them.

It was not that Beke was ungrateful.

"Bertie Fane," he wrote to his mother, "has been very civil, and you might, if it is your turn, call on Lady Sarah, and mention that I had said so. He met me at the station, which was, of course, quite unnecessary and rather bored one, and showed me the way to barracks, which the cabman no doubt knew independently. Also he showed me my quarters, and *introduced me to my servant*, which embarrassed us both and nearly made me laugh, which would have hurt poor Fane's feelings and been a shame, for he meant excellently. He is altogether well-meaning, but one has to avoid falling into any one's arms at first, as one might not find it comfortable, or care to stay there! Besides,

a hot intimacy on our part here might ultimately implicate you and Lady Sarah, which, living almost next door and having entirely different interests, would be horribly boring. I am sure Joan and Violet would not thank me for casting them into a thick friendship with Miss 'Rossy' or Miss Mabel. Still, if you meet Mr. Fane or Lady Sarah, you will, I know, let them understand that we feel their son has been very friendly."

Lady Beke, on receipt of this letter, went almost immediately to call on Lady Sarah, though it was not, as it happened, "her turn," and was much more profuse in her gratitude than her son would have thought in the least necessary.

The old generation was not so guarded as is the young. Lady Sarah wrote post-haste to her boy, and said—

"It was so *like* you, dear boy, to be so *sweet* to young Beke on his arrival, and I am quite *delighted*. He evidently wrote home full of you, and his mother came round *full of thanks and empressement*. By all means be civil to him. He is, I hear, a most excellently behaved young man, and of course in every other way unexceptionable. In fact, I have always *regretted* that they seemed rather unsociable and *stand-off* hitherto, and now I dare say your

intimacy in the regiment may bring the two families together and make us *better neighbours*. I should be glad, for Rosalind and Mab would have nice girls of their own *age*, close at hand, to run in and out with."

Lady Sarah was the harum-scarum fifth daughter of a rackety Irish earl, and had been much puzzled by the chill and distant civility of Sir Lionel and his family.

Hubert, on reading this, began to think he had wronged Osric in thinking him a bit "offish" and independent. The first night he had gone to Beke's quarters at about ten minutes to eight to escort him down to the ante-room, and introduce him to the others. But Mr. Beke's servant (who had been brushing his hair with Osric's brushes and was rather flurried, thinking it was his new master come back again for something he had forgotten) informed Fane that the newly-arrived second lieutenant had dressed early, having finished his unpacking, and had gone down five minutes ago to read the papers.

In the ante-room Hubert found him, sitting in the chair usually occupied by the colonel, who was a bachelor and lived in the mess, and reading the City article in *Truth*. For though hitherto Mr. Beke had never found his allowance, good as it was, afford him any margin for

investments, he always anticipated a moment when, from some source or other, such a margin would be at his disposal. With, say, even a couple of hundreds in actually spare cash Osric felt confident that he could speedily lay at least the foundation of the financial independence of his family.

"I went to your quarters to look for you. But you'd gone," observed Mr. Fane, rather obviously. "I thought," he added, the new arrival not seeming to grasp his meaning, "that you might feel as shy as I did the first night I joined. I was frightened out of my wits at having to walk into the ante-room and be introduced to the fellows. Gresby took me round, and I shook hands with everybody like a pump. I expect my face was about the colour of a red soldier's tunic."

Her Majesty's Black Northumberland Borderers, especially the younger ones who never wore them, are apt to speak of the red coats in a tone of calm but deep superiority.

"I came down first, you see," replied Beke; "so I shall get them one by one as they drop in."

The brilliance of this conception filled Hubert with astonishment.

"I should never have thought of that," he avowed with frank humility.

"Besides," continued the new arrival, "it seems much the same as dining with one's Militia mess. One has found out long ago that there's nothing to gib at. One regiment is pretty much like another, after all."

This last sentiment struck Hubert as being very levelling. There is certainly no other regiment like the Blacks.

"I never was in a Militia, you see," he observed. "Of course there was Sandhurst. I felt ape enough there at first. But that didn't help my feeling a fool when first I joined the regiment."

Mr. Beke did not further dispute his right to feel a fool if he wished.

"I must say," he replied, "I felt ten times more nervous the first time I dined in hall, when I went up to Magdalen."

But having stated the fact, Mr. Beke did not propose to go on and bore his companion with a detail of his experiences on that occasion.

"I say," continued Hubert, lowering his voice a little, "that's the C.O.'s chair. He always sits there."

Beke was not overcome by gratitude for the hint. Whatever chair he occupied it was obvious that he would get up on the colonel's arrival.

That arrival took place immediately, and

the introduction was got over. Beke was most polite and even respectful, but not, apparently, at all overawed. And so with all the others; Fane was struck with wonder. For it was obvious that the new subaltern was not in the very least "cheeky," and not in the least uppish (he wanted, and would get, no "kicking"); and equally obvious that he scarcely found the series of introductions more embarrassing than those to whom he was presented found them. Nor, after all, were they as numerous as they might have been. It was the middle of the leave season, and half the officers were away; moreover, it was not a guest night, and several were dining out; while, of course, the married officers were also absent.

CHAPTER II

In the letter to his mother, which has been already quoted, Beke wrote: "In honour, I suppose, of my being the new arrival I sat by the colonel at mess, and he immediately pointed out a large new portrait in oils, of your father, hanging opposite us."

Lady Beke, as may be remembered, was the daughter of Lord Brailham, a distinguished Crimean general, who at an earlier period of his career had commanded the Blacks.

"It was painted," her son continued, "about a year ago, by no one in particular, from a photograph, and a picture in the *Illustrated London News* of the period. You will remember that they wrote, at the time, asking for particulars as to colour of eyes, hair, complexion, etc., and to borrow uniform. It is quite ridiculously like my grandfather even as I remember him, and as a portrait is excellent. As a picture it is beneath discussion. Have you not often noticed that the likeness in a second- or third-rate artist's portrait is apt to be absurdly

true, while a painter with a great name is so carried away by the idea of his picture that he lets the likeness shift for itself; and it often shifts very badly? The portrait is full-length, and represents your father seated on the usual horse, which is boxing, in the usual manner, with both fore-feet in the air. The hind-legs are planted on the top of the usual hill, round which the usual battle rages. It need scarcely be said that the general is devoting his whole attention to the spectator, in total indifference to the battle, and his own dangerous position against the skyline."

Lady Beke thought this description rather flippant, for she was simpler than her son. But though Osric wrote in this easy strain he had liked to find the portrait there, and perfectly appreciated being its grandson.

A very ugly silver centre-piece was also pointed out as having been the gift of General Brailham to the regiment. The Blacks had, of course, been selected for Osric on account of this family connection; and, when Hubert Fane had done the honours on his arrival, it seemed to Beke rather as if a stranger had welcomed him, too effusively, to the house of some relation which he happened to be visiting for the first time, but which the stranger happened to know already.

Mr. Beke was a thoughtful young man, and by no means ill-informed, or unread. It was interesting to him to think that about seventy years ago his mother's father had also arrived to join one winter's afternoon, and had also joined at Warchester. The barracks were old; it was possible that Osric's quarters had been occupied by Ensign Brailham, more than possible that he had eaten his first dinner with the regiment in the same room where his only daughter's son had just eaten his.

The second lieutenant thought with some interest of the changes that had taken place since the ensign's day; and was not least amused to realize how very different he himself probably was from the sort of untaught lad, with only one idea, the soldier idea, in his pretty head, that his grandsire had been.

Osric Beke was not himself a lad, nor was his head pretty, though he was far from plain; but the best part of his own head, as he was aware, was not outside it.

"Before going to bed," he wrote to Lady Beke, "I hung up a few pictures, and so on, in my quarters. I was not afraid of making a noise, for the other officers on my staircase are on leave. The large photograph of Herkomer's portrait of you looks quite at

home over the fireplace, where I hope it won't be smoked as the other was at Magdalen. Joan's water-colour of Eresby looks excellent over my chest of drawers; and father, in his kingly garments, presides over my writing-table, as he did at Eton."

Eresby Manor, the reader may like to know, is the cradle of the Bekes, and at that time belonged to Osric's uncle, the twentieth Baron Wydgate. Sir Lionel Beke held the obsolete, and, as his son felt, slightly absurd position of "Arundel King of Arms," and the kingly garments alluded to were those of this ancient office, as displayed in a panel portrait.

". . . the old print of Melcombe that I picked up at Oxford is suitably framed over a small fixed cupboard that will conveniently hold my boots. It stands in the recess to the left of the fireplace, and seems likely to be dry. It is balanced by another on the right, where I shall keep tea, jam and biscuits, and over which the coat of arms, with all the quarterings, that Violet did for me, looks very nice."

It was rather characteristic of the young man that he should select for special mention, as they had been selected first for arrangement, the things most specially connected with his family. For, though Osric was by no means forward to talk of his own people, he thought

much of them; and any observant person could at once see that it was so.

Melcombe, it should be said, was a small country house, without much land belonging to it, which had come to Sir Lionel from his mother, and in which he was accustomed to spend Christmas, as well as some portion of every summer. From his mother also he had inherited a very comfortable fortune, or it is to be feared that the King of Arms would scarcely have been wealthy—at all events before his marriage. Lord Brailham's daughter had a moderate independent fortune.

Melcombe Abbey was not a fine place, nor was the estate large; but it was pretty and cheerful in summer-time, and Sir Lionel had taught all his children that since Henry VIII gave it to Sir Austin Mex, on the dissolution of the smaller monasteries, it had descended in a right line in that ancient family. The Miss Alicia Mex, who married Lord Wydgate as his second wife, had no brothers, and so the place came to her only son, Lionel.

CHAPTER III

On the second Sunday after his joining, Mr. Beke was invited to supper by one of the few married officers in the regiment, a very junior captain—Captain Orde. Some regiments are "terribly married," in others the married officers are altogether the exception. And so it was in the Blacks.

Perhaps the colonel's celibacy had set a good example; and possibly the two examples of matrimonial infelicity that the corps afforded had operated even more potently. For Major and Mrs. Walmer were an obvious failure, and the poverty of the Ordes was lamentably apparent. Some people said Major Walmer drank, though no one had ever proved it. And some said Mrs. Walmer was "imprudent"; but no one denied that the couple were hopelessly ill-assorted. Osric, who had a morbid horror of being mixed up in any conjugal disagreements, was inwardly determined to give the Walmers the widest possible sea-room.

As for the Ordes, they were good little people, and no one had a word against either; but it was dismally evident that Orde now felt he had done for himself by his foolish marriage, and was half soured in consequence; and equally plain that the disappointments of life had battered his wife out of the prettiness that had been her only attraction and her own worst enemy. But the Ordes could not be fought shy of, even if Beke had determined that that would be the kindest thing.

Mrs. Orde was the daughter of a parson near Melcombe, and when she sent her husband after church parade to invite Osric to supper he felt that he must go.

Hubert Fane was talking to Beke at the moment, and Orde felt himself, quite unreasonably, obliged to invite both. Fane, equally without reason, imagined himself bound in courtesy to accept, though he scarcely knew Mrs. Orde, and would rather have supped in mess.

"That's right," said Orde, rather drearily; "then we'll meet at church and walk home together. Fane can't show you the way."

This was supposed to be a hit at the boy for remissness in calling. Orde really hated the necessity of his brother officers seeing the

nakedness of the land; but he was very touchy, all the same, and easily offended if he fancied they were holding aloof.

Neither Hubert nor Osric had any objection to going a second time to church; and the latter might, very likely, have gone in any case. They sat in the same seat with the Ordes, and Beke noticed that the lady was very earnest. She sang the hymns in a pretty, childish voice, and she seemed to be praying as if she knew how to do it, and had a good deal to ask for.

She had indeed, poor thing! And the young men by her side would have been very melancholy if they could have known all her petitions. One was that they themselves might not be very hungry at supper, and that the cold meat might be sufficient. She thought of Cana, in Galilee, and hoped that she might be answered. Her case was, she felt, quite as urgent. And she prayed with tremulous eagerness that a threatened regimental ball, of which there was talk, might not be decided upon.

Before the sermon there was a hymn, which Fane sang with excellent good-will, and without *arrière pensée*.

"'Weary of earth,'" he declared himself to be,

and "'laden with his sin.'" So did Mrs. Orde, who indeed looked rather weary altogether; but Mr. Beke could not help wondering whether his cheery young brother officer suffered much under the fardel of which he now complained with such unquestioning pathos.

"'I look at heaven,'" he cried, "'and long to enter in.'" Nevertheless there was a healthy air of content with his present quarters that contrasted whimsically with the Weltschmerz of his words.

"'But there,'" he sang, with passionate self-accusation, "'no evil thing may find a home! And yet'"—with hasty reassurance—"'I hear a Voice that bids me come.'"

The hymn seemed beautiful to Osric Beke, and he wished that he himself had as nice a voice as Fane. But, though he cared much more for music, he knew he could not sing. And he could not in any case, have sung such words with Fane's honest unconsciousness of their discrepancy with his actual state.

Osric Beke was not blind to his own shortcomings, but he did not magnify them. Nor did he feel that he was "an evil thing." He had found the world, so far, not unpleasant, and was not, in any sense, weary of it. He certainly hoped ultimately to get to heaven;

but it would be a distinct and rather grotesque error of description to say of himself that he "looked" at it, and "longed to enter in."

"'So vile I am!'" cried Fane and Mrs. Orde together; and Osric Beke could not help protesting mentally. There was no hint of vileness on the patient, worried face of the poor lady; or indeed on the honest lad's comely visage. Vile he might become, no doubt, but hardly yet.

But the verse in which they sang—

"'Thine all the merits, mine the great reward,
Thine the sharp thorns, and mine the golden crown,
Mine the life won: and Thine the life laid down——'"

this struck Beke as especially British, in its frankly business-like suggestion of an excellent bargain.

The sermon rather bored Mr. Beke; he generally listened, but often with some sense of protest. He would not, himself, have at all liked to be a clergyman; but he would have rather liked to preach one sermon, and he was apt to think that it would have been a good one. The present discourse was vague and watery, and occasionally tried to redeem itself from its own half-conscious vacuity by abrupt bursts of extreme familiarity. They

were certainly successful in arresting the attention of Mr. Beke, but then he did not care about being arrested, even in church.

And the clergyman was too High Church for him. Osric had been reared in a school that was rather "churchy" but not at all ecclesiastical. His family was somewhat traditional in its religious prejudices, and could not be brought to welcome an innovation, even though it professed itself a return to what was primitive. Yet they were not Low Church.

The intelligent reader will understand the class perfectly if I mention that they liked a brass cross on the altar with a candlestick on each side ; only the candles must never be lighted. But they disliked a crucifix there extremely ; though they each had one in their bedroom.

Mrs. Orde also tried to listen to the sermon, and had no fault to find with it ; but her thoughts were much distracted by a sudden panic as to whether there was any whisky in the house, and an almost conviction that she had forgotten to tell her husband to fill the seltzogene. He was beyond the two young men, so she could not ask him ; besides, if suddenly wakened he was apt to shout quite loudly.

As for Fane, he had quite recovered from the excessive self-condemnation of his late vocal efforts, and was trying to recollect the names of the fifty-two counties of England and Wales, counting them on his fingers. He had a pencil in his pocket and longed to write them down on the blank leaf at the end of his prayer-book. Counting on one's fingers you keep forgetting whether you have already included such and such a county on your list or not.

Outside the church Beke was introduced to Mrs. Orde, Fane performing the ceremony. In this connection at all events Osric felt under an immense obligation to him. For he had prepared every one to know how to pronounce correctly the ancient surname of the Wydgates. It was the torment of Osric's life to hear his name pronounced like the nose of a parrot, or to see it spelled like the first syllable of "beckon."

"Mrs. Orde," said Fane, "may I introduce Mr. Beke to you." The lady bowed, the gentleman took off his hat, and they all moved off towards "Belvoir," the hired residence of the Orde family.

There was nothing ducal about it except its name. It was not even semi-detached. It was really and by nature No. 11 Battenberg

Terrace; but the predecessors of the Ordes had been once toll-gate keepers on the Rutland estate, and their idea of a compliment was to call their nasty little home after the castle of their great man.

Opposite Battenberg Terrace was Beatrice Place, if possible more dismally genteel. But Beatrice Place was three storeys high, which had a depressing effect on two-storeyed Battenberg Terrace, and made it darker. And the latter faced north. Both rows of houses were jerry-built; the taller vaunting themselves to be "Queen Anne style," and running much to balcony—originally painted white, but long since damp-stained and decrepit. Battenberg Terrace was of a putative Gothic order, and seemed to have reached the peeling stage of disease. The occupant of the tenement adjoining Belvoir, on the left, had emulously christened it "Chatsworth," while No. 9, determined not to be outdone, had adopted the surname of "Windsor" in lieu of its patronymic.

A small "garden," with a perambulator and two obsolete geraniums in it, added dignity to the front of Belvoir. There would scarcely have been room for a third geranium, and certainly not for a second perambulator.

There was a cast-iron Gothic paling, with a gate; but the gate was so organized that it had to remain either permanently open or resolutely shut; so the former alternative, for considerations of convenience, had been accepted.

Captain Orde produced a latch-key from his pocket, but the door paid no attention whatever to its application.

"You'll have to go round, Edgar, and get in through the scullery window," observed his wife.

It appeared that one could not be too careful how one shut the door behind one on going out; for if it were in the least banged the latch could only be moved from the inside. Both Beke and Fane had the presence of mind not to suggest that ringing the bell might be attended with good results.

Captain Orde started off to escalade in rear. Meanwhile the other three found it rather difficult to converse with ease or unconcern.

"I hope he won't cut himself," said Mrs. Orde, with wifely preoccupation; "last time he broke a pane of glass getting in, and cut his ankle."

However, she consoled herself by silently remembering that the broken pane, "not

showing," had been mended with the lid of a paper box.

They were soon admitted to a "hall" which for purposes of defence would have been invaluable, since even the slimmest persons had to enter in single file. Captain Orde carried off his visitors' hats to prevent their noticing that there was no hat-stand, and almost immediately afterwards himself drew attention to its absence.

"We took the house furnished, of course," he said, "and, as usual, half the things one wants aren't here. Janet complained about the hat-stand, but the landlord said that he had tried one, but had had to give it up. It was not convenient, he found, to move it every time any one wanted to pass."

The two young men laughed cheerfully; their host emitted his pleasantry with a dreary smile.

Immediately inside the door, on the right, and opposite to the supposed site of the hat-stand, was the drawing-room, an apartment in which there was really ample space for four persons, provided they all stood very close together in the middle; only the presence of a gasalier that "wouldn't go up" rendered that rather difficult.

In one corner stood an immensely tall standard lamp, evidently a wedding-present, of the copper and "wrought"-iron type, and crowned with a colossal shade, that was shaped like a parasol and dressed like a bassinette.

There were many other wedding-presents, mostly very smart, and some rather expensive, but scarcely any at all useful, and all admirably calculated to suggest how little their donors had cared into what sort of a room they would be likely to be put.

A Moorish stool, inlaid with mother-of-pearl, supported a number of silver articles, conspicuous among which was a cut-glass and silver flagon intended to hold about three pints of eau-de-cologne, and which had perhaps in all its career contained two ounces of that perfume. But Captain Orde, who was not without a gloomy ingenuity, had nearly filled it with common water and, by the application of a little gum to the stopper, had guarded against detection.

Over the chimney-piece was a large framed engraving of the Right Honble. Somebody Manners, in a heroic attitude, with his eye surveying the House of Commons with a bitter sneer. But the Privy Councillor "belonged to the house," and was therefore lightly

esteemed by its present occupants, who had nearly obliterated him with a flight of penny fans, of an Oriental intention and a speckly pattern largely contributed by a flies' dancing-school, that used them as "sitting-out" places.

CHAPTER IV

Mrs. Orde had gone up-stairs to take off her hat, and assure herself of the survival of her four babies. She was most anxious as to the survival of the fittest perhaps; if, that is, by the fittest one understands the one that had most fits. They all had them more or less, but Ralph had them oftenest. Ralph was two, Anson was three, and, alas! Kathleen and Sybil were not yet one year old. Poor Captain Orde had so far been unable, as he said, to "get over" Kathleen and Sybil. He almost looked upon them as a cruel nightmare from which he lived in the desperate hope of waking. Meanwhile they had terribly shaken his confidence in Mrs. Orde, against whom he felt it impossible not to be a little embittered. It was quite useless for the poor lady to try and shuffle off any portion of the responsibility on him.

All four babies were sleeping peacefully; so was the nurse-child, herself about twelve years old, who could have slept through the day of

judgment provided no smell of cooking were abroad.

There was none at Belvoir; for it was the "general's" evening out, and supper was to be cold, and was already "laid out," as she would herself have, cadaverously, put it. The general was seventeen and "walked out" with a lance-corporal, which sounds contrary to military discipline and "Queen's Regs," but was not, for she did not in reality hold Her Majesty's Commission. But she doated on lance-corporals; and her name in her present situation was Jane, though, as she explained to Mrs. Orde, in her last it had been Martha, Kite, or Hemma, *according to the floor*, for "missus thought it sounded better-like for the lodgers on the different pairs of stairs not to be all shoutin' the same name over the banisters, and hearing of each other." Captain Orde, with gloomy pleasantry, called her Janus.

Presently Mrs. Orde came down; and three minutes afterwards the nurse-child, who was not to have been protruded, knocked stealthily at the door and asked if she could "speak to you, mum."

"Which I forgot the napkins," she admitted in a smothered but audible confession when the conference had been granted. "I told Jane as I'd put 'em out. And, please, they're

in the hottoman and the two officers is settin' on them. I seen 'em through the key-'ole. So 'praps you'll get 'em out, please, yourself, please, mum. And I wished as I hadn't forgotten."

So Mr. Beke and Mr. Fane were dislodged from the box-ottoman, and they went in to supper each carrying their napkin. Fane's had a convenient hole in one corner, and he was absent-mindedly carrying it on his finger when he caught Beke's withering scowl, and was so agitated as very nearly to blow his nose upon it.

If anything could have been smaller than the drawing-room it was the dining-room, and the paper was much dirtier. So was the ceiling; so were the coverings of the furniture. And the hole in the carpet was in a more inconvenient place, just inside the door, so that you tripped in it more inevitably and undisguisedly.

There was a penetrating smell of onions; and Mrs. Orde found a pencil note addressed to herself pinned on to her bread and marked *Erjunt*.

It was from Janus, and was of Delphic brevity, and somewhat minatory, as Delphic utterances are apt to be. *Avide the cellid*, it ran, *and don't press the gentlemen*. With a sinking of the heart the poor lady glanced at the salad-

bowl. As a rule she made the salad herself, and she could not make out why Janus should have done so before going out; the bent of the young woman's conduct was not to work of supererogation. The lettuces, a small green onion, some cress, oil and vinegar, were generally set ready by Mrs. Orde's place at table, with the salad-bowl, oil, vinegar, pepper and salt. Then the lady made the salad fresh, and there was no cutting with steel knives.

The salad looked all right to-night, only it was evident that Janus had been over-generous with the onion.

Mrs. Orde, obedient to her oracle, did not *press the gentlemen;* but, alas! one of them did not wait for it. After sardines and bread and butter, Captain Orde carved the cold beef, which seemed to his poor wife lamentably shrunken since midday dinner. She could not help wondering if Lance-Corporal Puggle was partial to cold beef.

Mr. Beke liked salad, especially when it was not made with the heterogeneous *dressing* so common in England. And he had no prejudice against onions, and was quite aware that a very small onion can make a very large smell, when it has a room all to itself to smell in.

"May I have some salad, Orde?" he asked. "Yours is the right sort. In the mess they

always cover it with egg and *dressing*. I hate it dressed."

Orde was rather proud of his wife's salad. He passed it with evident complacence.

"Certainly," he said. "We like it undressed too; *décolletée*, I should say! Their French governess taught Syb to make it that way."

Mr. Beke helped himself and passed the bowl across to Fane; Mrs. Orde had refused when Beke offered it her at first. She lacked the moral courage, and preferred suspense to the knowledge of disaster.

Mr. Fane did not care for salad, and only took it out of compliment to the vaunted skill of his hostess in its preparation. Nor did he like it now, but he supposed that that was his own bad taste. He could not bear oysters, and caviare was anathema to him; in fact he was rather reminded of caviare by this salad.

"It's quite different from the ordinary sort," he said, in all simplicity.

It was indeed.

Mr. Beke swallowed his first mouthful, but with a tension of expression that was not lost on Mrs. Orde. Poor Mr. Beke! He was really very particular about his food; not with the sensuous particularity of a gourmand, but with the rigid particularity of a man who hated

anything to go wrong, or not to be just what it ought to be.

And like many quite young men now-a-days, he both suffered a good deal from his health, and thought much about it. He had to be very careful about his food, and there were a number of things he supposed himself unable to eat. Beef was one, and cold beef was, as he imagined, especially difficult of digestion. As a matter of mere taste he hated all cold dishes, and could never understand why they might not just as well be made into hot ones.

It was, among other considerations, the likelihood of cold beef that had made his acceptance of the present invitation an act of some self-sacrifice.

"Good Lord!" cried Captain Orde.

"What is it, dear?" inquired his wife faintly.

"Who made the salad?" he demanded. A small end of cress was still sticking out of the corner of his mouth, like a blade of grass out of a mowing-machine.

On learning it was Janus, he left the room abruptly and sought the nurse-child, whom he found chewing the cud, suspiciously near the pantry. The mystery was soon explained. On "laying the table" (the nurse-child talked of dinner-tables as if they were eggs) Janus

had discovered that there was no salad-oil. But, anxious to save at least appearances, that master-mind had hit on bicycle-oil as a substitute, coupled with a note to the mistress, not too explicit, as a measure of precaution.

CHAPTER V

On their way home the two young men seemed scrupulously to avoid any reference to their late entertainment, though Fane was really uncommonly hungry, and Beke was "feeling," as he always put it, "particularly beastly," which generally meant bilious and dyspeptic. Mr. Beke was convinced that he should digest nothing he had eaten, while Hubert was conscious that he had digested it all long ago. He could have assimilated a young crocodile had the Ordes happened to have had such a thing on their table.

Nevertheless both of the young men were thinking of the Ordes. Hubert was merely compassionate: Mr. Beke was condemnatory: and his condemnation, though falling chiefly on the head of Captain Orde, did not entirely spare the lady. He considered that they had done wrong to marry; and he was not sure that it was always the man who was the only active agent in matrimonial ventures. Captain Orde

ought to have been firm ; but Beke knew that gentleman's mother-in-law, and was conscious that uncommon firmness might have been required.

"I suppose," he said at last, "that one *will* marry some day" (it was a way of his to employ this impersonal manner of allusion to himself), "but certainly nothing seems less likely at present."

"That was rather what I was thinking."

For ten or twelve paces Beke make no rejoinder, then he said—

"One probably ceases to expect so much from marriage as one draws nearer to it."

"How do you mean?"

"Well, if one's demands were to continue as great as they now are, one would scarcely be likely to get married at all."

"Oh! Do you expect a great deal?" Fane laughed. Perhaps he thought Beke's remark sounded conceited.

"My brother says I do. He got married the other day and we talked about it the night before. I told him what I thought essential. And he said one would never get it. He declared that one would not even go on wanting it after one had found the right person. Until one had met her, he admitted, one might have all sorts of ideas as to what would be quite *sine*

quâ non : but, once one had got to care for her, it would none of it matter."

"I see. I think he was right."

"Not quite. Because what I think is this ; one *would not get to care for her* at all, if she had not got the things one associates with one's ideal."

Fane laughed again.

"Do you think," he asked "that the people who do get married are Ideals?"

"Not mine," replied Beke, also laughing, but in a peculiar grave manner of his own.

"I don't know," admitted Fane, "that I have any ideal. Of course I shouldn't care to marry a girl who was ugly or unpleasant or vulgar, or whose people were disreputable, or anything of that sort."

For some little time they said no more. Mr. Beke was not thinking of his friend's ideal. Fane himself was wondering what she was like.

"Do you, as a matter of plain fact, believe in the inevitableness of falling in love?" asked Mr. Beke at last. "According to the books it happens to every one, at least once. That's what I doubt. It seems to me that it is, in reality, quite uncommon."

"Well," said Fane, rather diffidently— "fellows do seem apt to get sweet on some girl

sooner or later." It was the first time he had ever been called upon to discuss love in the abstract.

"Exactly. And so people declare they are in love. Making love and being in love are altogether different."

"You seem to know all about it."

Beke laughed.

"Empirically nothing! I have not been in love so far, and I can scarcely imagine oneself *making* love to anybody, either."

Fane thought of a recent dance or two and half fancied he could imagine it in his own case.

"You see," continued Beke, "being *really* in love, and getting married have nothing to do with each other. That's the common error. Getting married, it seems to me, when people are really in love, absolutely vulgarizes the situation."

Fane was rather taken aback. He was not in his own conduct fanatically strict; but the proposition of such generally subversive principles seemed to him startlingly audacious.

Mr. Beke perceived with satisfaction that he had not been fully understood. He knew himself to be the cleverer man, and was not displeased to find himself occasionally beyond Hubert's depth.

"Most people," observed the latter, "seem rather of the other opinion."

"Of course. Most people are stupid. But that is all right: for marriage is no doubt the proper way of carrying the world on, and that's done by the majority. But the majority are not called upon to fall in love: and very few really do. When they do they are silly to get married —that spoils everything."

Mr. Fane seemed only half inclined to accept this proposition.

"If I *was* in love," he suggested, "I expect I should want to marry the girl."

"Yes. But you would be very silly. Don't you see that the real, absolute state of being in love is a state that might, if not subjected to violence, last for ever? That's the love that poets sing about: and some novelists describe. But nothing can go on lasting, undiminished, unspoiled, after its climax has been passed. And marriage is the climax—at all events the anticlimax."

CHAPTER VI

If Fane had been more practised he would have recognized that Mr. Beke's pronouncements were not improvised. Mr. Beke was much given to thought as an occupation ; and he rather liked to see how his cogitations stood the test of subsequent speech.

George Eliot tells us that everybody is apt to have a natural faculty for something, and that Uncle Pullet had a strong natural aptitude for ignorance. Mr. Beke had a constitutional tendency to think about things. Sometimes the things were unimportant, and often his thoughts would be of very moderate value, but it was a sort of practice that might lead to good results in the future. It had already resulted in a correspondence between his mind and tongue that made him seem clever to men like Hubert Fane.

In reality Osric Beke was not so much clever as intelligent. Intelligent rather in the French sense of the word, than in our debased

application of it as to not too dunder-headed school children or workmen.

Beke was thoughtful by nature, and extremely observant by habit; and the faculty of observation had almost reached the point of becoming perception. But though perceptive he was not intuitive. What he knew he had arrived at quite consciously, he could give his reasons for the knowledge. What he could not have stated reasons for he did not know.

And he was rather unimaginative. He could scarcely have written a novel, and he could certainly not have written a poem. But if he had been forced to write a novel the characters would most likely have been well treated and consistent. For he would have merely described those of actual persons whom he knew. But if any plot had to be attempted it would be certainly a failure.

It was not uncommon for those who liked Beke to declare that he was extremely witty. But this was a mistake. If he succeeded in being amusing it was by means of a quaint sort of conceit of expression and fancy, that was not at all spontaneous, and in which the practised ear could at once detect the note of preparation.

When they got back to barracks Mr. Beke was very glad to find an excellent fire in his quarters. On the table was a box of plain

biscuits and a cup and saucer : in the fender a kettle.

"Come in and have a cup of Vi-cocoa," he suggested to Fane ; "there are plenty of biscuits and I have some more cups."

Fane was rather flattered by the invitation and at once accepted. Also, he was provided with a vacuum for the biscuits and cocoa. Some men have the power of imposing themselves, so to speak, on others. So it was with Osric Beke : though six weeks older than Fane, he was by nearly a year his junior in the service, and a year's difference of seniority among subalterns is apt to go for much. But Fane felt flattered that the new-comer should invite him into his quarters : and Beke himself knew that is was so.

It was certainly out of no snobbishness : for Fane was, in point of birth, quite equal to the other.

And within a very few weeks, Beke had similarly imposed himself on the other junior officers of his regiment. He remained for half a year the last-joined second-lieutenant ; but, long before a newer arrived, Beke certainly led the subalterns, and seemed almost to lead the captains also. And this sort of leading position had been acquired almost unconsciously, and without any explicit purpose.

It was rather odd that no one should have noticed the growth of this influence : but no one did. Nor did it strike any one how seldom Beke was heard to address any senior officer as "Sir." Most subalterns are apt to be much too generous with this title of respect ; especially while they are still second-lieutenants : majors hearing it applied to themselves incessantly, and even captains very often.

Mr. Beke applied it off parade to no one but the Colonel ; and to him only in the orderly-room.

CHAPTER VII

Mr. Beke found that he liked young Fane, who was an honest lad, and apt to be right-thinking when he thought at all.

"He doesn't debauch his mind with *too much* thought," Beke told himself: and he was probably right.

He asked Hubert to tea in his quarters rather often, and those small tea-parties of never more than half-a-dozen, and seldom so many, became an institution. Before, no one ever thought of tea except in the ante-room. But Beke's comfortable example was soon followed: and on a sleety winter's afternoon it was found distinctly more agreeable to sit by one's own fire in one's own quarters and have tea there than to sally across the slushy barrack square to the mess.

Though others copied Beke, no other tea-parties approached his in distinction. It was very seldom that any one would come uninvited, though sometimes the invitation would be very impromptu; but the invitations were always

appreciated, and never refused. In fact it happened occasionally that some one, who had himself asked a neighbour in to tea, would excuse himself, saying, "Do you mind coming to-morrow instead? Beke has asked me."

Beke did not generally ask the same person too frequently. During the winter it was not uncommon for the party to assemble an hour or so before tea, and they would read Shakespeare, each, of course, having often to take several parts. Sometimes they would play chess or piquet, but that was when only one was invited.

Beke disliked Warchester, and he did not like the winter. The place was too far from London for frequent visits, such as one could make from Aldershot: and he did not hunt: and the winter always made him "seedier." He really had a liver that frequently behaved in the most outrageous way, in spite of the great deference with which he treated it.

Like most young men of the present day he drank little, and never except at meals. And this was, in his case, largely out of health considerations, though the ordinary one of its being now "poor form" to drink much, and the other of its being a stupid way of wasting money, had also due weight.

At Easter Mr. Beke received an invitation to stay at Eresby from his father's only brother, Lord Wydgate. And he knew at once that he should accept it.

He had never been asked before, and had always wished to go there. Sir Lionel and Lady Beke were invited annually; and for the last year or two one of their daughters had been included in the invitation. After his recent marriage Osric's elder brother had been bidden with his bride; and twice before it he had been at Eresby. But Osric himself had never seen Eresby, and he was a man to whom the head-quarters of his father's family would always be more interesting than any other house, no matter how splendid the other might be.

So he wrote, almost at once (it was scarcely his way to do anything quite at once), to his mother and explained that he should not come home at Easter, as he would not be able to get more than five or six days' leave, and he was going to Eresby.

As a matter of fact he had been home very lately, for he had taken second leave, and Easter fell early.

Mr. Beke's preparations for his visit were deliberate and careful. He was going for less than a week, but in his opinion one wanted the same things during one week as one wanted

during three. And the young man's dislike of discomfort was rather special and characteristic.

Nor was he indifferent to the impression his belongings would create on the footman told off to valet him. On the whole it is likely that Mr. Beke might concern himself practically more with the opinion of his inferiors than with that of his equals.

Most likely he had an unconscious knowledge that he could himself form the judgment of the latter: but that the former would be subject to less personal and more merely material influences.

The night before he started he made a pencil calculation of what this visit would cost; and he put it down at eight pounds thirteen shillings. It actually did cost eight pounds four and sixpence, because he found that he was driven both to and from the station, which was about five miles from Eresby. His uncle had mentioned that a carriage would meet him at Meldon station, but Mr. Beke was too prudent a country-house visitor to jump thence to the conclusion that he would necessarily be driven thither on his departure.

Mr. Beke enjoyed his journey; he always did like the actual travelling, and in spite of his churlish liver never felt at all "beastly" in

the train. He travelled on this occasion first-class, which he considered himself almost bound to do. The footman would very likely be waiting on the platform to show him the carriage, etc., and it is embarrassing to have the door of a third-class compartment opened for one by a baronial retainer, of possibly a subdued superciliousness of demeanour. I admit that it was a weakness in Mr. Beke not to rise superior to such considerations.

So Mr. Beke settled himself very comfortably into one of the corners of a first-class carriage facing the engine (the opposite side would certainly have made him unwell), with a good many rugs, and newspapers: a foot-warmer, and all the appliances of aristocratic travel. He was fortunate to have been able to get off early, and opposite him, on the unoccupied corner seat, was a luncheon basket.

The more distant corner, on the same side, was filled by an elderly gentleman, also well equipped, who soon read himself to sleep with the current *Saturday Review;* his wife sat opposite him, and looked out of the windows. The lady and gentleman had no luncheon basket, but Mr. Beke observed that the tunnels smelled strongly of sherry, and that after each the old lady appeared very crumby.

For three hours and a half the train journey lasted: but there was no tiresome changing to be done, and Mr. Beke was very comfortable.

He ate his luncheon with full publicity, and an easy lack of embarrassment, that filled the old lady with envy. He took his time, and he evidently rather enjoyed his chicken and ham, salad, and half bottle of Burgundy.

He seemed to make no crumbs, and when he drank it was in a leisurely and unventful way out of a tumbler. There was no chancy suction of a flask, into the mouth of which one's tongue was drawn up uncomfortably, and no spilling down his neck.

It was Easter Eve, but still March, and very wintry. There was not a sign of leaf on hedge or tree, and the fields had been whitened with a crisp frost: but that was gone now, and a sleety drizzle was trying to come down, but was much harassed by a blusterous north-east gale.

Mr. Beke sat back in his corner and read a volume of French Memoirs: it was light to hold, and the print was good and clear. He was fond of reading French, and understood it nearly as well as English: he talked it also without degradation, and with a good accent. Occasionally he looked out of the window, and the bleakness of the scene outside only

heightened his sense of *bien-être*. The carriage was new and excellently built and fitted : it ran perfectly smoothly and was neither draughty nor stuffy. All these things were noted by Mr. Beke, and helped to make up his impression of satisfaction.

It was a fast train and only stopped twice before Meldon. The old gentleman and his wife got out, and Mr. Beke helped them with their luggage. The old lady beamed upon him, and frequently asked her husband if he did not think that nice young man very like Adolphus. The gentleman objected in vain that Adolphus was fair and rather short and thick : a mother is not restrained by considerations such as these from discovering a resemblance between her son and another young man, good-looking and well-mannered, to whom she may have taken a fancy.

Mr. Beke noticed with satisfaction that the carriage which met him was well turned out and that the horses were entirely creditable. He liked to find the surroundings of the head of his clan all that they should be. Nor was the personal comfort to himself at all lost on him.

Meldon is, of course, an important station : not so much on account of the size of the town, as of its being so largely frequented a hunting

centre. But Mr. Beke immediately found himself treated with an amount of attention that is generally only given to the guests of local magnates arriving at small roadside stations. And as the carriage drove through the town it met with universal demonstrations of respect.

This also Mr. Beke liked. He did not, of course, take the salutes to himself, but it was agreeable to know himself the near relation of the family so honoured.

Four miles from the station, and about three outside the town, they turned off the high-road, and into a park. The gate was Gothic, surmounted by Mr. Beke's own arms, but ensigned with coronet and supporters ; to right and left was a Gothic lodge of the same ruddy sandstone as the gate. It struck Mr. Beke as perhaps a little inconvenient to have one's sitting-room on one side of a road and one's bedroom on the other : but the arrangement produced a neat effect of uniformity.

The woman, who came out to hold the gate open, curtsied more than once, and seemed to regard Mr. Beke with almost personal interest. After all, might he not one day be her master? Mr. Beke would have been sincerely shocked had any strange catastrophe swept away his uncle, father and brother : but he could not help remembering that such a calamity would make

him lord of all this domain which he now examined with so critical an interest. And the recollection was not at all disagreeable.

He knew that the park was famous for its oaks. And he admired them, bare as they now were, with an appreciation that no other trees in the world would have had from him. Two gnarled, but still vigorous giants, he at once recognized as Gog and Magog, planted eight hundred and twelve years ago by Judith, Countess of Huntingdon, the niece of William the Conqueror. His brother had photographed them, and his sister Joan had sketched them in water-colours.

He watched the deer as they scampered away among last year's dead fern, almost with reverence. Their ancestors had been given to Hugh, third Baron, by King Stephen.

Presently the road wound round the foot of a low hill crowned with a group of very ancient oaks, whose black arms seemed tossed up passionately against the dun sky ; and the house came in sight.

It was very long, and rather low in proportion to its length : of warm red stone, the windows and doorways of grey granite. The line was irregular, broken by many towers and at one end by several gables. A low, broad tower at the east end supported a flagstaff, from

which the black lion, in its field of gold, fluttered proudly. The road now ran parallel with the house, skirting what seemed a moat, but was in reality a narrow arm of Eresby Lake.

CHAPTER VIII

"How do you do?" said a young lady in a riding-habit, rising from a seat near the huge open hearth, and coming forward to shake hands. "My mother has just come in, and has gone up to change. Sir Paul and I have only now got back from hunting, and we were too lazy to go and change before our tea."

Whereupon Mr. Beke understood that this must be Miss Van Arnhem, his uncle's step-daughter. And the young lady introduced the two gentlemen. Sir Paul's other name appeared to be Devizes. But one never can quite hear the other person's name during an introduction, though one's own sounds so unduly prominent. As a matter of fact, the baronet's surname was de Visors.

"Mr. Beke," said Miss Van Arnhem, "Sir Paul de Visors."

Mr. Beke bowed; Sir Paul swallowed a piece of bread-and-butter, and helped it down with an upward nod.

"This," he said, "is the heir. Come let us kill him."

Sir Paul was constantly seized with these lamentable attacks of pleasantry.

Mr. Beke reddened a little.

"No," said Miss Van Arnhem; "there's no necessity whatever. It is Mr. Beke's brother who must perish, if anybody."

She then proceeded to inquire about his journey, and gave him some tea.

Mr. Beke at once told himself that he should dislike Sir Paul, and in matters of that kind he was not apt to change his mind. Concerning Lady Wydgate's daughter he would make it up more deliberately—she was more important.

Presently Sir Paul finished his tea, and went off to change. He again nodded as he went, with the air of giving the other two permission to remain as long as they liked. Mr. Beke tried to looked as glad as possible that he was going. But this was thrown away on Sir Paul, who took it for granted that every company must regret his departure from it.

Mr. Beke looked round.

"It is a fine old hall, isn't it?" said the young lady. "Of course you know all about it. If you were somebody else I should tell you that the roof was put up in 1100, and has never needed alteration, and that it took eighty oak

trees to make the roof, the floor, and the panelling."

"I hope you will tell me all the same, although I am so unlucky as not to be somebody else."

She laughed.

"Well, I have told you! You don't look at all as if you thought it a misfortune to be yourself."

"It is a misfortune, anyway, that one has to make the best of."

Miss Van Arnhem looked curiously at Mr. Beke, and made up her mind that the best was not so bad.

"I have often wondered," she said, "what you were like. You are not in the least like your brother, whom Sir Paul wants to kill."

"No," replied Mr. Beke, ignoring Sir Paul. "I am taller, and then he has black eyes and curly hair."

"Oh, you are altogether different. He is always in fits of laughter."

This was, Mr. Beke knew, an exaggeration; but he was aware that he was graver than his brother.

"Any one would say," added the lady, "that *you* were the elder."

Most young men of the present day would immediately have said that they wished they

were. Mr. Beke said nothing of the sort, and Miss Van Arnhem noted the circumstance.

And to most young men she would have boldly said, had it been as true as in this instance, "And besides you are very much better-looking." But somehow to Mr. Beke she did not feel able to say that.

"Nor are you very like your sisters," she said instead; "though perhaps Joan might be a little like you, if she wore a moustache, and had dark blue eyes."

No girl had ever remarked on the colour of his eyes before—at all events to his face. And Mr. Beke was quite aware that it was flattering that they should be so noticed; nevertheless, he did not yet make up his mind whether he should approve of Miss Van Arnhem.

"My sisters have often spoken of you to me," he observed generally.

She laughed.

"Did their description do me justice?"

"Ah! mere words——" began Mr. Beke.

"Exactly!" again laughed the young lady; "of course they could not."

"Did they tell you about all the questions *I* asked concerning *you?*" she added presently.

"No. Did you ask any?"

"No! Not one! I knew that I should learn nothing from their descriptions. Sisters never

can describe. Of course they could have told me whether you had ever had the measles, and how long it was since you had been vaccinated."

"It is now seven years," said Mr. Beke. "Yes, please; I will have another cup."

She poured out the tea, holding the pot much too high so as to give it a "head." She was not thinking of the tea at all.

"And did they really tell you much about me?" she inquired.

Had Mr. Beke, once again, been the ordinary *fin de siècle* young gentleman, he would now have grinned and replied that he had never troubled his sisters with any inquiries on the subject.

But he merely said, No. Not as much as he would have liked.

"After all," remarked she, "I must be rather an interesting person to your family. Supposing I were to inveigle Lord Wydgate into leaving all this to me?"

She indicated by "all this" the surrounding walls with their armour, and stained glass, and family portraits, and panelling. She was pouring out her own second cup of tea, and employed the spout of the teapot as a pointer.

Mr. Beke seemed to shrug his shoulders a

little, but they did not really move ; it was his dark eyebrows that lifted for a moment.

"You think I could not?"

"Not at all. I have no means—yet, at all events—of judging what your influence with my uncle may be."

"And if I could? Eresby is not entailed ; it never has been."

"I know."

"Well then! Suppose I were to get Lord Wydgate to leave it all to me?"

Again Mr. Beke produced the effect of very slightly shrugging his shoulders ; and again the impression was made without his actually doing so.

"What should you say then?" persisted Miss Van Arnhem, not peremptorily, but with interest.

"It would not be much good *saying* anything."

"I'm afraid it would not be much good trying to *do* anything either!"

"Perhaps not. If it were, I should, in such a case, hope that my brother would go to law with you."

Miss Van Arnhem laughed.

"I don't believe he would," she said ; "he is so easy-going."

"One has to be very easy-going indeed to let a property that has belonged to the same

title and the same family for about eight hundred and thirty years pass away to a stranger without a struggle."

"How rude you are!" But the young lady again laughed. "How can you call me a stranger? I have lived in this house for seventeen years—ever since I was three years old. This place has always been my home since I can remember anything. I know every tree in the park, every cottage in the villages for miles round. I belong to it all; why should it not belong to me?"

"Simply," Mr. Beke replied unhesitatingly, "because it does not. Because it belongs to some one else."

"It belongs to my father! He is, to all intents and purposes, my father, the only father I have ever known, and a very kind and good one. He could not love me better if I were ten times over his daughter. I am his wife's daughter, and no one was ever so fond of his wife." . . .

Mr. Beke was quite unmoved.

"It does not alter the case in the least. All that you say, however true, cannot affect the just rights of my brother."

"Your brother! What rights has he? Suppose *I* had a brother, suppose my mother and Lord Wydgate had a son."

"In that case my father and my brother would have indeed no rights in the matter. But that is not the case."

"Suppose my mother were to die and Lord Wydgate marry again!"

Mr. Beke laughed.

"Considering the devoted attachment that you speak of," he said, "one can hardly imagine that he would be so disrespectful to her memory."

Miss Van Arnhem also laughed. She knew better than Mr. Beke how old and decrepit her step-father was, and how singularly unlike dying Lady Wydgate was.

"Still," she insisted, "you must admit that it all makes me rather an interesting calculation in your family."

"You would be interesting," he said, "in any case."

CHAPTER IX

At that particular moment their conversation came to an end, or rather their dialogue, for Lady Wydgate herself came in, and, with her, two ladies and a gentleman. Lady de Visors, the mother of Sir Paul, and a Miss Hartington, were the two ladies, and the gentleman was a Mr. Gerald O'Rorke, who came about ninth on the list of Lord Athlone's thirteen children.

It was understood that a Cabinet Minister and his wife were somewhere on the premises, but neither they nor Lord Wydgate were visible till dinner-time.

Lady Wydgate was thirty-two years younger than her husband, who was about seventy-three years of age, being just nineteen years senior to Mr. Beke's father. And Lady Wydgate was a well-preserved, even beautiful, woman still. Her manner was more gracious and dignified than her daughter's, but any one could see that they were very much alike.

Her welcome of her husband's nephew was exactly what it should be. To some extent she

treated him as a son of the house, and made it evident that he was to feel himself at home; but there was no jerky familiarity, or forestalling of intimacy. Mr. Beke at once perceived that she was precisely the sort of woman of whom he approved, and he had no misgivings about liking her.

Lady de Visors, it appeared, knew his mother, having met her in London or on the top of the Righi, or somewhere. She was about sixty years old, but very erect and handsome, and her manners were rather fine. She had been a maid of honour before her marriage, and was born a Tregorran, and, to her thinking, nothing earthly was greater than a Tregorran of Tregore.

Mr. Gerald O'Rorke was supposed to be in the Diplomatic Service, and was, as Miss Van Arnhem told Mr. Beke, *détaché* from some Embassy somewhere. He had served under Lord Brailham for a few months—not Osric's grandfather, of course, but his maternal uncle.

While he was dressing for dinner Mr. Beke thought over his conversation with Miss Van Arnhem. What she had said was, to some extent, what he had often thought, and he knew that his father and mother and sister had often had the same subject in their minds. But none of them had ever overtly discussed it with

another. He felt quite sure that even his parents had never done so with each other.

Whereas the girl, whom he met to-day for the first time, had crudely dragged forth the subject in their opening conversation.

Had the girl been merely *gauche* it would not have been so bad, but she was not *gauche* in the least. He was never swift in his likings, and he fancied he should be far from hasty in getting to like this young lady. Nevertheless he enjoyed dressing for dinner.

He always rather liked it. The under-sense of the day's serious business being over, and of only agreeable leisure remaining, was pleasant. Mr. Beke was not vain, but, if he had been, his appearance need have caused him no dissatisfaction, and his clothes were always excellent. He had not, like some men, a great many clothes; but what he had were irreproachable.

The room was large and important. Mr. Beke at once knew that he was not being put off with second-rate quarters in any side gallery.

The fire burned well, and the logs sputtered cheerfully. He was not in the least a snob, but the coronets on the silver candlesticks and inkstand were agreeable to him. He noticed them again on his towels, and on the corners of his sheets later on.

His father had a coronet over his arms; but

it was the official oak-leaf coronet of a King of Arms, and was neither personal nor hereditary. Artistically it was prettier than the four balls that appear on the baron's coronet, but Mr. Beke preferred the latter. Over the fireplace hung a large engraved portrait-group representing his own grandfather and grandmother, with his father between them, in a very large laced collar and the eighth year of his age. Another copy of the same print adorned Sir Lionel's study in their house in London.

Just as Osric finished dressing there came a tap at his door, and his uncle walked in. They had met before, but it was some years ago, when the nephew was a young boy. Lord Wydgate had not the slightest recollection of him. He was rather pleased with him, though his naturally cold manner did not show much pleasure.

Perhaps they neither of them knew it, but they were a good deal alike. There are often two types in a family, and Lord Wydgate and Osric were both of a standing type of the Bekes, tall, rather slim, very straight, and dark as to hair and complexion, but with blue eyes ; whereas Sir Lionel and his eldest son were of another type, thicker, coarser, fairer and less refined.

Mr. Beke was impressed by his uncle, whose manner, though formal, was courteous and fine.

And the elder man was glad to find his nephew had also a fine manner. Most young men, Lord Wydgate complained, had neither manner nor manners; and he secretly detested the rollicking joviality of his brother's eldest son.

Had the old man known how unlike the brothers were, this would not have been the younger's first visit.

They shook hands rather ceremoniously.

"Dear, dear!" said the old man, "how like my father you are! And I was considered very like him when I was a young man. But it is about half a century since I was your age."

It was indeed. But Lord Wydgate looked rather frail than old. There was something still fiery in his clear, blue eyes; something that reminded one of youth in his decided, unwavering step.

They went down together; and the old man leant on his nephew's shoulder, not for support, but because it was the nearest thing to a caress that was possible. If God had let this lad be *his* son! It was always disagreeable to the old lord to think of his name and place being the heritage of the boisterous, loud-laughing brother.

On the stairs he paused.

"There he is, you see," pointing to a full-length portrait by Lawrence; "there's your grandfather. And opposite is my mother—not

your grandmother, you know. There *she* is. Not so fine-looking as my mother, though."

Again he surveyed his nephew to compare him with the picture.

"Yes, it's a wonderful likeness. And your father and your brother are the other type ; like the fifteenth lord, who got his brown eyes and curly head from the Bascombes."

They went on and entered the drawing-room together, the old lord still keeping his left hand, thin and white, but not in the least tremulous, on the strong young shoulder.

"They look like father and son," thought Miss Van Arnhem. And something in the look of them, as they came in together, seemed to her to be in some vague way touching. There was something great about the old man, and about the young man something that might mean the promise of greatness : a sort of hard nobleness that might lead ever so high.

The girl felt that, whether she liked him or not, Mr. Beke was not quite common or ordinary. On the whole, however, she thought she should like him.

CHAPTER X

"WHAT an odd thing," observed Miss Van Arnhem, "is Precedence."

This was later on, nearly at the end of dinner. The party only numbered ten, three at each side, and two at each end, of a rather broad table. Mr. Beke sat between Miss Van Arnhem, whom he had brought in, on his right, and the Cabinet Minister's wife on his left, who had been escorted by Lord Wydgate—she was a Viscount's daughter, as well as being wedded to the Chancellor of the Duchy of Kent. Immediately opposite Mr. Beke, between Sir Paul de Visors and Mr. O'Rorke, sat Miss Hartington.

Mr. Beke observed that as Miss Van Arnhem spoke she glanced across at that diamond-crusted virgin.

"If," continued Miss Van Arnhem, "she were to marry that wild Irishman, and I were to marry you she would have precedence of me, though my father was a Duke's son and a Duke's brother, and your father was a peer's son, and

your mother a peer's daughter. Whereas her father made pianos and she never had a grandfather at all!"

Other things besides precedence are odd, thought Mr. Beke. It was the first time any young lady had put the case of a union with himself. And though he never for a moment forgot the genealogical facts which the girl alluded to he had never in his life before discussed them.

"Who is Mr. O'Rorke?" he inquired. "He seems to know my uncle."

"He is the seventh son of Lord Athlone. And Lord Athlone's grandfather was a crossing-sweeper in Dublin: but he found a sovereign one day among the mud on his crossing, and so he became a millionaire and was made into a Union Peer. It has nothing to do with the Workhouse; I used to think it had."

Mr. Beke did not think the young diplomatist looked at all like a crossing-sweeper.

"One perfectly understands," he said, "that finding sovereigns would naturally involve his becoming a millionaire if he went on finding them long enough. How long *did* he go on?"

"Oh! He didn't go on at all. He only found one: but he bought a lottery ticket with it and won a prize of ten thousand pounds."

"The difference," observed Mr. Beke, "between a million pounds and ten thousand is so trifling that——"

Miss Van Arnhem laughed. "You will forgive my seeming to interrupt," she said, "but I was still quite in the introductory chapters of my story. The original O'Rorke invested his ten thousand pounds in manure which he got for nothing from the Corporation of Dublin on whom the new and beautiful idea of sanitation was just dawning: only he had to carry it away in carts—he had about five hundred I believe. And he sold it to the farmers and market gardeners in the suburbs and surrounding country: in that way he soon made about two hundred and fifty thousand pounds."

"He would, of course. And two hundred and fifty thousand from a million leaves only——"

Miss Van Arnhem raised her fork with the gesture of an orator.

"Permit me!" she said. "That quarter of a million he laid out on ships; which he cargoed and sent to sea: he was a good man and heaven blessed him. They soon foundered."

"I presume," remarked Mr. Beke, "that they were insured."

"To four times their value, as it happened.

Insurance," continued the young lady "was then, like drainage, in its infancy. And Sir Bryan O'Rorke's success drew attention to his talents."

"He had been knighted?"

"No, Barrow-knighted, as he would have called it. That was for being Lord Mayor of Dublin three times in a row. At the Union he was M.P. (for Carlisle Bridge, I think) and voted for it. He also turned Protestant and bought Athlone Castle from the de Burghs: so he was made a peer."

The great-grandson of this great man was making himself very agreeable to Lady de Visors, all innocent of the biographical notice that Miss Van Arnhem was narrating. He was a stalwart, well-grown young man, with rather a handsome face and a pleasant manner and a patriotic affectation of talking with a brogue.

"And Miss Hartington," inquired Mr. Beke, "is her family history equally picturesque?"

"It is much shorter. It begins with her father. He was a piano-tuner, but he invented an 'improvement' whereby cottage pianos could be made to sound exactly like grand pianos: and he sold the idea to his employer on condition of being taken into partnership."

"And became a millionaire."

"No. He died three years ago, leaving two daughters and two millions."

"Where's the other?" inquired Mr. Beke, glancing tentatively round the table.

"Oh, she's dead," said Miss Van Arnhem. "She behaved like an angel and became one: so this one has all the money. I doubt if she'd take Gerry O'Rorke. It seems a fancy price for him."

Mr. Beke laughed. He did not feel any nearer to approving of the young lady; but two millions did seem a good deal for the gentleman.

"She'd certainly have *you*," added Miss Van Arnhem, "if you'd undertake in the settlements to poison your father and brother: she's immensely taken with this place: and 'likes the sound' of 'twentieth baron' particularly. Only you'd be the twenty-first—in fact the twenty-third if you gave the others a short innings first."

Mr. Beke did not look, somehow, as if he had any idea of marriage settlements at all, at present: certainly not with Miss Hartington.

"She's always liking the sound of things," continued Miss Van Arnhem. "She asked me yesterday if I did not 'like the sound' of a

bowl of roses. I told her I'd never heard one."

"That," said Mr. Beke, unpleasantly, "was very amusing of you."

Miss Van Arnhem laughed comfortably ; she was not easily disconcerted, and impossible to snub.

"Of course," she said. "Every one knows I'm nothing if I'm not amusing."

"In that case," he demanded, "you must certainly be distinctly entertaining."

Lord Wydgate was devoting his attention for the moment to Lady de Visors. The Cabinet Minister's wife turned to Mr. Beke. She was a very shy woman and had nothing to say, but esteemed it a duty to make the attempt.

"I'm afraid," she observed, "that you must have had a very cold journey." She was quite conscious herself that this reflection really belonged to an earlier period of the evening. Mr. Beke had got beyond the stage of a new arrival.

She evinced a mild suprise to learn that Mr. Beke had enjoyed the journey. Her idea of enjoyment was not to sit in a railway carriage, watching a bleak landscape go by under a sleety sky.

"I must admit," said Mr. Beke, "that I was bored once. When it was raining worst, almost

really snowing, there was a man trying to catch a horse in a field; one could not help feeling how unduly wet he must be getting, and it spoiled one's comfort."

"I should think," said the lady, "it must have spoiled his."

"Of course," replied Mr. Beke, wondering at so great a capacity for missing the point.

But it is quite a gift of its own: not to be confounded with mere stupidity. This lady was not really stupid at all, but she had a limitless faculty for failing to see the point.

"Is Sir Bangham Orred still General at Warchester?" she inquired, shifting the *venue*.

Mr. Beke had to admit that he was not. His widow, Mr. Beke believed, still resided there, however.

"Ah! I remember her. She was one of the pretty Miss Whympers: we met Lady Whymper and her three daughters at Pontresina once. She had one eye grey and one eye brown."

"It is our present General's wife who was the beautiful Miss Whymper: Sir Roderick Gunn," suggested Mr. Beke. "I believe Lady Orred was a Miss Jones."

"Ah! Quite so," said the lady with mild triumph. "I felt sure it was your present General's wife I knew."

"Who," inquired Mr. Beke, at the next

opportunity, of Miss Van Arnhem, "was the Cabinet Minister's wife?"

"She was, and still is, my aunt," replied the young lady. "It is from her I inherit my conversational brilliance. She was my father's half-sister. *Her* father was Lord Hounslow. *Mr.* Bermingham was like Minerva and had only a father: he was a newspaper-boy (I mean the original Bermingham), and there never was any Mrs. Bermingham, that I've heard of, in that generation. Only, before he died, the newspaper-boy owned two newspapers of his own: and my Right Honourable uncle-in-law, the Chancellor of the Duchy of Kent, is the result."

Mr. Beke looked at him. He was explaining the sewage system of Glasgow to Lady Wydgate, with pieces of bread and all the forks in the neighbourhood.

"No," said Miss Van Arnhem, "he doesn't look clever. Why should he? He isn't."

"I never said anything about his not looking clever! Besides I think he is. One must be, to be what he is, with his chances, as you describe them."

Miss Van Arnhem laughed.

"His chances weren't bad. He was at Eton and at Christchurch; he was private secretary to a Prime Minister at twenty-three, and a

Member of Parliament at twenty-four. You're mixing him up with his father: *he* was clever, if you like. My uncle's strong point is his taste for facts. He wallows in them; and he is superfatted with them. He never for one instant, walking or sleeping, forgets to abhor a vacuum, or loses the consciousness that the earth is an oblong spheroid. He basks in the thought. He would lose all his pleasure if you suggested that it was any other sort of spheroid.

Mr. Beke laughed. "I could not help suggesting it," he said. "And after all you are proving his originality. An oblong spheroid is all his own conception."

"Oblate then! It's all the same. Long and late are much the same thing from different sides. But you've really no idea how he leans up against a fact and rests on it. If he was in a railway accident, and got excited about his butcher's bill, he would calm himself with the consideration that the angles at the base of an equilateral triangle are equal to two right angles."

Mr. Beke again laughed.

"And yet," he murmured "you assert that he adheres slavishly to facts!"

But Miss Van Arnhem ignored the interruption.

"And if he were dying," she continued

"Aunt Adeliza would soothe his passing by reminding him that the *whole* must be greater than its part, and that all the loaves eaten in London in one year would, if cut up into thin bread-and-butter, cover North and South America."

CHAPTER XI

THE next morning was Easter Sunday, and Miss Van Arnhem went to early service. Outside the church she met Mr. Beke, and they walked home, across the park, together.

At first they were rather silent. But it was not in her nature to remain silent long.

She had been thinking of him ; and perhaps he, too, had been thinking of her.

She had been surprised to see him in the church. It was not her notion of the young officer. And perhaps she thought it was rarer than it really was. Mr. Beke was by no means the only officer of the Blacks who went to early service that Easter Sunday morning.

In church his demeanour had been grave and reverent, but not emotionally devout. She was sure that, though he might be conscientious and possessed of quite definite principles (even definitely religious ones), that he was not what she herself understood by pious.

She did not wish him to be.

Mr. Beke, she thought, was almost handsome.

And his figure, though thin, or at all events slight, was stalwart and straight. His blue-grey eyes were intelligent and rather cold, but his lips had a double suggestion. They were firm and masterful, but they were neither pale nor thin. The animal part of the young man's nature had been habitually well curbed, but it was there, and might slip the leash on occasion.

He also had been thinking, as they walked along, of her. But he was still wondering whether he should like her or no. She knew already that she liked him.

"Do you think," she asked presently, "that one generally does right or abstains from doing wrong out of the love of God, or the fear of Him? Out of the hope of heaven, or the dread of hell?"

He answered more readily than she, perhaps, expected, as if his thoughts upon the subject were familiar to himself—

"Out of neither. One, of course, can only answer for oneself; but I certainly do not feel any practical fear of hell. Why should He send me there? What have I done to force even His divine justice to so horrible an act of sovereignty, much less to rob His divine mercy of all pretext of forgiveness?"

"It seems too horrid to be good only not to be punished. And not so very much better only to get rewarded. I try to hope it is out of love."

The young man made no reply. He was singularly truthful, and he did not feel that his own attitude towards God deserved so great a name. The kind of vehement personal tenderness towards God that "mystic" theology teaches even to-day, and of which one reads in the old saints' lives, was altogether foreign to him, and beyond the limits of his nature.

So far he had never felt any hunger of the heart for any person at all; it was singularly unlikely that he should have experienced any such emotions towards an invisible Being, concerning whom he had been taught chiefly principles and facts.

Miss Van Arnhem was quite different. She might in another century and another country have been a St. Mary Magdalene of Pazzi. *Abyssus abyssum invocat!* The empty depths of her utterly human and loving heart could very easily have cried out upon the fathomless depths of the great heart of God.

"I think," said Mr. Beke, very truthfully, "that when I have done right, as you say, or abstained from doing a wrong to which

one was inclined, it has been partly out of conscience, and partly out of common-sense."

Miss Van Arnhem was quite sure that he was stating the actual fact as regarded himself.

"But it is very dull!" she said, regretfully. "Almost as dull as Uncle James."

Uncle James, Mr. Beke knew, was the Cabinet Minister.

"He may seem to you dull," said the young man, "but he certainly represents success." Then, after a brief pause, "After all, nothing is more dull at times than not doing the wrong thing to which one was inclined."

Miss Van Arnhem noticed the form of expression thus repeated. Mr. Beke would not speak of himself as resisting temptation.

They walked on in silence. There had been a lovely white frost, and the great park glistened now in the clear, cold sunlight.

"Did you notice the clergyman who gave us Holy Communion?" asked the girl, presently.

"Yes. He seemed very old."

"He is nearly ninety. He married your grandfather and grandmother, and baptized your father. He will like to think he has given you Holy Communion. He is the kindest man I ever met. Would it bore you to go and see him? I would like to take

you ; or, perhaps papa will want to take you himself. He wished to take your brother, but he made some excuse. My lord was very much offended for his own sake and for Mr. Escott's. When he proposes an arrangement every one here falls in."

"I should like to go very much," said Mr. Beke, ignoring the allusions to his brother's shortcomings.

"Do you yourself see how like you and your uncle are?" she asked next.

"One hardly knows what one looks like to other people. But I did think last night we had a sort of air of each other."

She laughed.

"Yes. It is just that." "It is rather a fine air!" she thought, but that she did not say.

A cock pheasant crowed somewhere, a quarter of a mile away, in a spinney of dark stone pines, and Mr. Beke turned towards the sound, the girl watching his face.

"You don't look as if you wanted to shoot it," she said. "If it had been your brother he would."

"It is out of range," observed the young man prosaically ; "and I am sure he would not have dreamed of shooting a pheasant at the end of March."

"Don't be tiresome. I mean this. Your brother's only interest in animate nature is to shoot it. You are different. To you that pheasant crowing in the spinney is not a mere thing to shoot. It is a part of Eresby, the place where for eight centuries your people have lived. And this park is a sort of sacred place to you; where those who bore your name before you were young once, and grew old; where they lived, and where, perhaps, they loved; and where they walked, until they walked no more; but, on the necks of other men who had known them, they were carried to the church from which we have just come. To your brother it represents eight hundred and fifty acres of grass land with excellent pheasant coverts."

"I wish you would not abuse my brother," said Mr. Beke quietly. "He is the best fellow in the world."

"I'm not abusing him."

"You're not praising him."

"I don't want to praise him or abuse him. He is much better-looking than you are, of course."

"Why 'of course'?" Mr. Beke laughed. "I might conceivably have been better-looking than he."

"Oh, quite conceivably! I wish you were twenty-seven."

"Then I should be older than he." The young man laughed again.

"Exactly. It would have been a much better arrangement. You would make an excellent Lord Wydgate, and he would make an excellent soldier."

Mr. Beke walked on without reply. It was really no part of his business to make himself the champion of the providential arrangements concerning primogeniture in his family.

"You're not my idea of a soldier a bit," observed the young woman.

The fact did not seem to appear either interesting or important to Mr. Beke. He was not greatly concerned to know what Miss Van Arnhem's martial ideals might be.

"It is quite ridiculous," she said, "that you should be in the army and he should be in diplomacy. The other way of the stuff would do admirably."

Mr. Beke gave no sign of agreement or dissent; he merely showed that he was paying the necessary degree of attention.

"You seem to think," the girl continued, "that I dislike your brother. I don't in the least."

Mr. Beke said that he was delighted to hear it, much as if he had said he did not care sixpence whether she liked his elder brother or disliked him.

"On the contrary," said Miss Van Arnhem, "we are the best of friends. I really owe him some gratitude, for he did me an excellent turn once—it was on the eighth of last August."

"That was the day he got married."

"Exactly. He might have proposed to *me;* he had lots of opportunities, and he knew that everybody else wanted it—papa, and my mother, your parents, and every soul on the estate. And he is so good-natured and obliging that for years I feared he would."

"Why," inquired Mr. Beke, coldly, "did you *fear* it?"

"Because it would have been so difficult to say 'No,' and so impossible to say 'Yes.' I should have been marrying papa's nephew, and he would have been marrying his uncle's stepdaughter. It would have been quite impersonal. An excellent arrangement—but one doesn't want to be arranged with a husband—or a wife."

"Certainly not," agreed Mr. Beke.

He knew perfectly well that it was true

that this marriage had been much desired, and perhaps, almost expected. But he had never heard it discussed, and he had certainly not looked forward to discussing it with one of the hypothetic parties.

CHAPTER XII

It was a mile to Eresby church from the hall. The latter was called Castle Eresby, the former Eresby Monachorum.

For the principal service of the Sunday most of the party generally drove to church, and all of it if it happened to be wet. To-day it was splendidly fine and spring-like; there was a blue sky, with not a cloud, and every trace of frost had gone from the air. The sun was warm, and, though the trees were still naked, their brown tracery was not less lovely than leaves against the high blueness of the sky.

Miss Hartington chose to walk, and frankly asked Mr. Beke to accompany her. Then Miss Van Arnhem said she would not drive, and Mr. O'Rorke offered himself as her escort. The rest of the party drove.

Miss Hartington was not beautiful, but she had a comely and intelligent face, and her manner was honest and cordial.

"I envy you all this," she said, glancing round comprehensively.

Mr. Beke laughed, and said that it was not his.

"It may not belong to you, but at least you belong to it. I should think it must be very interesting for you to come here for the first time."

Mr. Beke did not deny his interest.

"Now," said the young woman quietly, "there at once is the one thing you have that I have not got, and never can have."

Mr. Beke looked interrogative. She continued—

"Well, no doubt you have been told that I am very rich. Perhaps that I have two or three million pounds!"

The young man admitted quietly that this was so: and now Miss Hartington laughed.

"I have not got that. My father made (as Miss Van Arnhem will have told you) pianos: he also made, as she has informed you, a fortune. But one's fortune is the one thing concerning which the world is optimistic: papa left my sister and myself ten thousand pounds a year each. That is not two millions, you know."

"It is," said Mr. Beke, "a very neat income, however."

"Oh yes! And I perceive all its advantages. But as I was saying, it can't buy me what you *have*."

Mr. Beke looked, perhaps, slightly sceptical. The young woman reddened a little.

"You mean," she said, "that I can *marry* a place of this sort! Very likely; but though my money may induce the owner of some such place to study my merits, I can never have it all *behind* me as you have. My children would, but not their mother."

"I see, I think, what you mean."

"Of course you do. It is so simple. Now I could very easily (though it *is* only ten thousand a year!) *buy* an old estate, with park, and gardens, and castle, and lakes, and so on. There are plenty in the market: about ten estate agents and auctioneers send me catalogues of such places for sale every week. Or I may, as you suggest, some day marry a man who has one: but I can never walk about, as you can here, feeling that here my name has been borne, and borne nobly, for centuries and centuries: that under these trees my forebears played as little children, and flirted perhaps as youths and maidens; that, in one word, I *belong to the soil.* You look around you here, and you know that what you see has filled the eyes of your people for ages, and so it fills your heart as no other scenes in all God's lovely great world could fill it."

"That is altogether true," said the young man.

"And so I envy you! For all my money-bags can never buy me that."

Mr. Beke was touched by the simplicity of this avowal. He found his companion more interesting than he had expected.

"You must not think," the young woman added hurriedly, "that I am so nasty as to be turning up my nose at myself as a parvenu. That would be a hateful treason against my father's memory. I think trade a great thing. And I often *admire* (as the old-fashioned books say) to see what great things it does."

She perceived very plainly that her companion, if silent, was by no means uninterested: and she went on.

"Even in one's own instance," she said. "For here am I, to-day, quite as much a lady as you are a gentleman, your fellow-guest in the house of your uncle. But, when it was your grandfather's home, no doubt my grandfather was a labouring man, or a shop-boy."

Mr. Beke did not find rejoinder easy; but he was extremely interested. Whatever Miss Hartington's father or grandfather might have been, she herself belonged unmistakably, as he fully perceived, to his own class, and would have been as foreign as himself if thrown by accident into any lower.

"I often wonder," the young woman said

presently, "if any of you ever think what my *relations* must be like."

He turned his head, and she saw at once that he at any rate had not done so. The idea was quite a new one to him.

"You never thought," the girl said with a healthy laugh, "that I had any! Well, I have. I have an aunt, for instance, who was a dressmaker at Liverpool. But she made a comfortable little fortune, and sold her business; with the proceeds she bought a villa, called Balmoral, at Rock Ferry. She was much too proud to make herself known to me; but father left her a legacy, so I found her out and volunteered to go and see her. It was a laudable attempt, but it was a deadly failure."

Again she laughed, but not so comfortably. Miss Hartington disliked any of her efforts being failures.

"I suppose," said Mr. Beke, who had to say something, "that you had not much in common?"

"We had too much! We had nearly all our ancestors back to Adam! And, after all, any two human beings have all the *important* things in common. But it's the unimportant ones that really matter."

Mr. Beke was silent, and a vision of Balmoral Villa at Rock Ferry rose before his mind; he

was not really imaginative, but the girl may have communicated it to his apprehension by some process of mental telegraphy.

"You see," she went on, "Aunt Maria is not a lady; and for weal or woe I am. All my life I have lived among people of your sort; and Aunt Maria's sort proved worse than one had expected. I can always get on with what we call 'poor people.' And it seems to me that it would be very vulgar to call them vulgar. The Balmoral Villa circle were not poor at all; they were rather well off."

"But——"

"Exactly."

"If any one were to propose to me," Miss Hartington resumed, "I should, before accepting him, insist on his going to see Aunt Maria."

Mr. Beke felt inwardly thankful that he had himself no intention of making the young lady an offer.

"You talk," he said, "as though no one had ever done it."

"No one has."

Mr. Beke again looked incredulous.

"Oh," she said, "I know I am twenty-two years old, and that I have, as you remind me, a good deal of money. *But no one need be proposed to unless she likes.* So far, I haven't liked."

"I should think," said Mr. Beke impersonally, "it must be a very boring experience; unless, of course, you want to say 'Yes.'"

"You are quite right. Well, here's the church, so we must postpone this interesting discussion."

Mr. Beke observed that during the sermon Miss Hartington's attention was much given to the fine monuments of his family that almost filled the chancel, and what had been the Lady chapel in Catholic times, but was now called the north chapel.

Their eyes met intelligently, and she seemed again to be telling him that her money-bags could not buy them either.

Miss Van Arnhem saw that glance of mutual understanding, and wondered whether it would be worth while to dislike Miss Hartington.

CHAPTER XIII

Most country houses have institutions, and it was almost an institution at Castle Eresby to go for a walk on fine Sunday afternoons. Lord Wydgate always walked on that day, though ordinarily he preferred driving, as he was soon tired.

They started about three, and for a short time Mr. Beke found himself with his uncle. Sir Paul de Visors and Miss Van Arnhem were in front, behind were Miss Hartington and Mr. O'Rorke.

"You walked to church this morning with Miss Hartington," said Lord Wydgate. "She tells me you are an excellent listener."

"She is a very easy person to listen to," replied his nephew.

The old man smiled.

"Yes. She is interesting. Your aunt and I like her very much. Judith thinks her too virile."

Judith, as Mr. Beke was already aware, was Miss Van Arnhem.

"I think," he said, "that she has a sort of boyish directness."

"Just so, and I like that. It is not a manner; it is her nature. One could trust her; she will make somebody an excellent wife."

"She could probably have been the wife of a good many people already."

Lord Wydgate smiled.

"Very likely. But she does not boast of her conquests. If anything she would be rather ashamed of them."

"She seems clever, don't you think?"

"As to that, every one is clever now-a-days. It is the fault of the age. But she is much better than that; she has an abounding common-sense: and she is always learning. You have had no talk yet with Mr. Bermingham?"

Mr. Beke admitted that he had not. It did not strike him that the Chancellor of the Duchy of Kent greatly affected conversation.

"He's an old friend," said Lord Wydgate, "and his wife is Judith's aunt. You would find him also interesting, though in a different way. It is only in England that one finds exactly that sort of man."

Mr. Beke looked willing to be enlightened, and his uncle continued—

"He is a greater man than you might suppose. He will do very good work when he gets the chance: and he will make the chance. He is of no family, and he is not a flaring genius; but he is definite, and he gives all his life to one object—public business. His father began poor and made a fortune by ceaseless toil and huge capacity. He also would make a fortune if he did not happen to have one: as it is, he devotes just the same qualities to the interests of the country."

They walked on a little way almost in silence: and the young man looked around on the wealthy English landscape.

> "All things in order stored,
> A haunt of ancient peace."

"Yes," said the old man, answering his thought, "it is a great thing to belong to it all. Fifty years ago my father and I were walking here, just as we are now; and he said to me, 'My son, never look at all this without thinking of the Parable of the Talents.' I have never forgotten it."

The young man could not but feel the perfect simplicity of his uncle. There was nothing mealy-mouthed about it.

"When I am gone," he went on, "your

father will feel that too. It would be a great disaster if Eresby ever fell to one who looked on it as a *mere possession.*"

Again the young man felt uncomfortable. He knew he had no right to suppose that Lord Wydgate was thinking of his brother : yet he did believe that it was so. He held his peace.

"For many years," continued his uncle, "I could not get used to the idea that no son of my own was to follow me here. I have long ago got over that. That is why I can talk about it to you."

"I hope," said the young man simply, "that there will be no question of a successor for many a year to come—even though it were to be my father!"

The old nobleman smiled, but he shook his head.

"That is a kind and pretty speech," he said, "and kindness of speech and prettiness of manners will never seem old-fashioned to me : but my reign here draws to its end. I am old, and am not one of those machines that work almost as well when they are old as at first. I am not tired of life, but life tires me. Soon I shall have a long rest."

He spoke quite cheerfully, as one to whom

the thought of such rest was not unwelcome; but to young ears the mention of death, by one who speaks of it as overshadowing himself, seems always sad.

Mr. Beke found that he liked his uncle. The old peer was like his younger half-brother, but, in truth, more interesting. Lord Wydgate had a larger, finer nature, though the character was, in many respects, the same. The young man was like his father, but he was still more like his uncle.

"I dare say," said Lord Wydgate, presently, —changing the subject as if he knew it were a sad one for his young listener—"that you wonder why I have never asked you here before. You must have thought it rather nasty of me."

Mr. Beke reddened a little.

"It is very kind of you to ask me now," he replied. "And you have given me a very kind welcome."

"You *are* welcome; and now that you have come once I hope you will come often. You and I, I think, will always be good friends. But all the same you must have wondered why you have not until now been asked here. And I am going to tell you. You find us very straightspoken!"

Mr. Beke laughed. He had never known so outspoken a household.

The old man laughed too.

"I think," he said, "we have all caught it from Judith. She always says out everything. I dare say she seems a chatterbox: but I like her candid way of discussing things, and have caught the infection. She rather frightens some people."

At this point there was a gate to go through, and the rest of the party were waiting for Lord Wydgate to come up and unlock it. He carried a pass key that unlocked all the gates on the estate.

"Judith has one too," he explained, "but she is so afraid of losing it that she never brings it out."

The relocking of the gate, when the party had gone through, caused Lord Wydgate and his nephew again to fall behind.

"Well," said the old man, "now for my confession. At first I asked neither your brother nor you, for the weak and wretched reason that I was still sore about having no son of my own, and I thought I could scarcely bear to see Lionel's. Then I determined to get over that, so your brother was asked; but still not you."

He turned to look smilingly in his nephew's face.

"That was for quite a different reason. When I had finally accepted the idea that your brother would some day succeed here (after your father, I mean) I began to dream a foolish little dream. And it was that Judith might still reign here after her mother; she is so good. They all worship her. No one remembers that she is not my own daughter. All her life she has known Eresby and Eresby has known her. So I was so foolish as to dream—nothing is so foolish as to dream when one believes oneself to be quite wide awake."

"You thought that my brother and she might have married."

The old man nodded.

"Yes. It would have been a very delightful arrangement. And so obviously simple that one might have known it was out of the question. Well, that made me afraid of you. I was in dread of Judith liking you better than your brother: and, so far at least, it turns out that I was right."

Mr. Beke laughed.

"I had no notion that I was such a bug-bear," he said. "It is at all events a relief to know that I can do no mischief now."

They had nearly overtaken the others, owing to Miss Hartington's shoe having come untied.

"I think it is very wise of Miss Hartington to let her shoe go wrong," Mr. O'Rorke was saying.

The lady had certainly a pretty foot, and there was a little laugh.

"On the other hand," said Miss Hartington, "a young gentleman told me once that if his wife's shoes came untied as often as mine he would get a divorce."

"He was evidently a brother," observed Mr. O'Rorke. But the young lady reminded him that she had never had a brother.

Mr. Beke now found himself walking next Miss Van Arnhem. On her other side was Lord Wydgate.

"Papa," she said, "I believe you have been talking about me. You both look so guilty: especially Osric."

It was natural enough that she should call him by his name: but it sounded odd to the young man.

"Yes," replied Lord Wydgate, "I was telling him what a chatterbox you are."

"I must say," said the girl, "that I think you might have left him to find that out."

"Perhaps," suggested the young man, "I never should."

Sir Paul de Visors looked as if he wished to protest that it could not possibly matter to anybody what Mr. Beke thought of anything. Mr. O'Rorke fully appreciated this and was delighted. He was the best-natured fellow in the world, but he loved a "shindy."

"After all," declared the attaché, "it's much jollier listening to a chatterbox than to some one who never says a word."

Everybody laughed.

"In this country," observed Lord Wydgate, "it is admitted to be impossible to listen to some one who doesn't speak at all."

"That's just what I say," affirmed the cheery son of Erin, and every one laughed again.

They had left the actual park now, and were walking up a broad ride in Eresby Forest; most country houses of any importance have a park, but Eresby Forest was the special glory of the Bekes. In Saxon times Eresby had been a royal preserve and hunting-ground. It was nearly three thousand acres in extent, and was by no means covered with wood, but comprised several farms, almost entirely pasture, within its extent. These farms had, doubtless, grown up centuries after it had ceased to be a royal chase,

and had gradually encroached upon the woodland. Still, at least twelve hundred acres of true forest remained, and many of the trees were of immense antiquity. Huge rides ran through the woodlands, and the turf of these was like green velvet, soft and smooth and dry. Sometimes the rides would open out so as to be rather glades than mere tracks through the forest.

"There's where you shot that *hen pheasant on the third* of September," remarked Mr. O'Rorke, directing Sir Paul de Visor's attention to a certain spot in one of these wide glades.

The others laughed, but Sir Paul did not. "And there," he remarked, stonily, "is the place where *you* shot Lord Wydgate on the fifth of November."

Again they all laughed, Gerry O'Rorke as cheerfully as the rest.

"He's making you out a guy, Lord Wydgate," the perky young attaché responded.

It was delightful in the Forest. The sun of the March afternoon was warm, and in those sheltered glades there was no breath of wind.

The purple-brown of the woven oakwoods, leafless still, was pierced here and there by the black-green of stone pine or fir. The smell of the woodland filled their nostrils.

"Tsk!" said Mr. Gerry O'Rorke, and two-

score rabbits broke up their meeting fifty yards ahead.

"What a shame," said Miss Van Arnhem; "they were at church."

"*That*," observed the attaché, "was why they made tracks so readily. Human nature's the same everywhere."

Another laugh followed this reflection.

"What it is to be a wit!" said Mr. O'Rorke. "As sure as I speak I set ye off."

"So does a clown in a circus," remarked Sir Paul de Visors.

"You're no clown, then, anyway," retorted Gerry, grinning broadly.

"Are we going to Gorham, papa?" inquired Miss Van Arnhem, who doubted whether Lord Wydgate was pleased by these bickerings.

"Yes. I want to take you to see one of our oldest tenants, Osric. She was your grandmother's (my step-mother's) maid, and she married one of our best farmers. He has been dead nearly twenty years, and Mrs. Raper has the farm still."

"Widows," added Judith, "are out of order. So she's a proud exception."

"As a rule," said Lord Wydgate, "landlords do not like letting farms to widows. They cannot tell how a woman may succeed: they are often very poor farmers, and in case of

failure it is a painful thing to have to turn a widow out. But Mrs. Raper, of course, could not be refused : and she was very anxious to keep on the farm. She has been a great success. Gorham is as well managed as any farm in the county."

Mrs. Raper and her farm did not much interest Sir Paul or Mr. O'Rorke. As for Mr. Beke, he would not have been interested either had Mrs. Raper been maid to some one else's grandmother, or Gorham Farm belonged to any other estate. As it was he listened with pleasure.

To Lord Wydgate and Judith everything at Eresby was important. To Miss Hartington almost everything in the world was interesting —everything real, that is, and human.

A mile's walk through the Forest brought them to Gorham, a big red farm nestled in a cup of the rolling pasture that was dovetailed into the woods.

The house was large and solid, with tiled roof, lichen-rusted from red into a warm ochre. Behind were rick-yards and barns : in front an orchard and, close to the windows, a garden of flowers and fruit bushes—gooseberries, currants and raspberries.

The deep slumber of an English Sunday lay, like an atmosphere, upon the place. The

turkeys walked with Sabbatical severity, the pigeons, already preparing for roost, seemed also aware of the first day of the week and willing to curtail it. A sheep-dog came out to take stock of the new arrivals : but he did not frisk about and bark with weekday carelessness as to noise. While the cart-horses in the paddock rested with a smug and puritanical ostentation.

CHAPTER XIV

MRS. RAPER did not receive the guests in the parlour, but in the great kitchen. There was a smaller kitchen where cooking went forward; but the large room was more like the hall of a manor-house. Only hams adorned the beams, instead of shields or coats of mail.

By the wide hearth, in a very high-backed chair of carved black oak, sat the widow, as soon as she had led each of her guests to a seat.

She had the weight of more than seventy years upon her back, but it did not bend or stoop under them, and the snows of so many winters had whitened but not thinned her locks. Her eyebrows were still black, and so were the long lashes of the keen, direct, dark eyes. Many wrinkles scarred the vigorous old face, but its complexion was youthful and fresh still. She was a handsome old woman, and she had handsome manners, like a great lady's; not a great lady of the present fashion, but of her late mistress's time.

For a few minutes her attention was all given to Lord Wydgate, and it was odd to watch their mutual courtesy. She was scarcely more respectful to him than he to her.

"And this," he said, "is my nephew, Mr. Osric."

"Master Lionel's son?" The old woman leant forward, clasping the arms of the great chair with her white, almost pale-blue, and wrinkled hands. The hands were strong and not small, but well-shaped and unspoiled by any rough work.

"Yes," said Lord Wydgate, "*your* lady's grandson."

The straight, cold, dark eyes were bent eagerly on the young man's face.

"He is more like her, my lord, than his father."

Then she thanked Osric for coming to see her, and told him it was a pleasure and an honour to her to see her old mistress's grandson.

"He's quite the hero of the piece," observed Mr. O'Rorke in a stealthy aside to Miss Hartington. "See how disgusted the baronite is."

"This," said Lord Wydgate, "is Sir Paul de Visors. I think Lady Wydgate drove Lady de Visors over to see you once. Miss Hartington you know already."

Mrs. Raper made her respects, and Miss Van Arnhem said—

"And this is Mr. O'Rorke; I'm sure you remember my bringing *him* before."

Mrs. Raper said she remembered very well, and Mr. O'Rorke laughed guiltily. On that occasion he had set a booby-trap for Miss Van Arnhem, and Mrs. Raper had herself walked into it.

A most excellent tea was prepared, and they all did justice to it. But, as Mr. O'Rorke observed, Osric was clearly the guest of the evening. Their hostess did her best to treat them all alike; but her attention was really absorbed by the son of her old mistress's son.

"His mess is five times as big as ours," complained the attaché.

"Nonsense. You *helped yourself*," retorted Judith.

After tea was over, Osric was carried off to the parlour to see his grandmother's portrait—portraits, rather, for she was represented in many costumes and at very varied epochs, from girlhood to old age.

"That is in her Court dress; not when she came out, but when she was presented on her marriage," announced Mrs. Raper. "And that is with your father, Master Lionel, in her arms."

Osric laughed.

"My father is a good deal altered," he observed, picturing with amusement the King of Arms in the coral stage of his existence.

"He is not nearly so like my lady, his mother, as you are, sir."

"They think me like my uncle," he observed.

"Yes, that is true. You are a regular Beke (your brother, sir, is not at all like my lord); but, all the same, there is a great look of my dear lady, especially when you frown a little."

Osric laughed.

"I hope I do not scowl much."

"You do not *scowl* at all," corrected Mrs. Raper, with dignity. "But I saw you frown at something Sir Paul de Visors said. That was quite right; a gentleman should know how to frown on occasion. When my dear lady frowned people remembered it, and were not apt to make her frown again."

"She was evidently an old caution," says Mr. O'Rorke in one of his guilty asides to Miss Van Arnhem.

They had followed Osric and the old woman into the parlour. Mrs. Raper was not specially pleased at this, and led the way back to the big kitchen.

"There's no fire in here," she said, "and it strikes cold, Miss Judith."

The parlour was not comfortable like the great kitchen. The kitchen was panelled from floor to ceiling; the well-polished oak gave back from every panel a cosy twinkle lent it by the clean, red fire; and the place had the homely air of use and wont about it. Whereas the parlour was a room of state; comfortless lace curtains draped the windows, keeping out a good deal of light, but giving no suggestion of warmth. The walls were papered with a pale and chilly grey; the grate contained a white shred ornament with a few gold filings, and a drab drugget protected the drab Brussels carpet from injury; the smell of the room was damp and cadaverous.

In the warm kitchen Sir Paul de Visors was complaining to Miss Hartington; Lord Wydgate had stepped out into the farmyard, and was chatting with the bailiff.

"One should never stay in a country house on a Sunday," Sir Paul was saying; "one is sure to be bored. If one is not dragged to three or four services one is dragged to see the tenants."

"I thought you wanted to join us," replied the lady.

"Because you were coming, that was all. Otherwise it is the sort of thing I hate."

Miss Hartington expressed her regret at having been the innocent cause of his martyrdom.

"For my own part," she added, "it is the sort of thing I like. I like Sunday to be different, somehow, from other days. And a walk like this seems to be just the thing."

"Oh, the walk's all right. It's this teaing at the farmers'. One is only brought to witness the glory of the family. It's just the same at other houses of the sort; Lord Wydgate's no worse than others. But it bores me."

Miss Hartington laughed.

"Ah! Well! That is quite as it should be. The boredom of the modern prince is like the pea under the feather-beds of the princess in the fairy-tale."

But Sir Paul did not recognize the allusion; he thought she was talking nonsense, and did not see the point of being called a prince, when he was only a baronet.

"The golden youth," said Miss Hartington, "is warranted to be bored by things that the inferior classes would honestly enjoy. It's a sort of *cachet* of the day."

The young man was assailed by a misgiving that she was laughing at him; such misgivings on his part were rare, but that did not render

them more agreeable. He was displeased and got surly.

"It is ridiculous," he declared, "to pretend that any one can really enjoy being called upon to make a gallery for the spectacle of somebody else's family greatness. Why should *you* pretend to like it?"

"*I* of all people," she laughed. "I who have no chance of a *revanche*, having no family of my own to make a spectacle of! Isn't it good of me?"

He reddened; he had been unconscious of his own *arrière pensée*, and was annoyed that she should have detected it. He wanted to stand well with her. He had, in fact, almost made up his mind that in a certain eventuality he might seriously consider the idea of marrying her. There was no hurry, and he had other strings to his bow that he intended to try first; but a little preliminary love-making might not be out of place.

He was not sorry that the return of the party from the parlour saved him from any necessity for a reply. He tried to fill his eyes with mute reproach, with the result of appearing to be on the point of sneezing. Lord Wydgate came in from the farmyard, and they stood upon the order of their going.

"Well, good-bye, Mrs. Raper," says her landlord, "I'm glad to hear—Plowder has been telling me—how successful you've been with that draining."

"Bereham Bottom? Yes, my lord. It was almost a marsh, and it will make very good pasture this season. Good-bye, Miss Judith; my best respects to her ladyship. Will you please to thank her for the magazine she sent."

Then the rest of the farewells were made, and all had gone out except Osric. With him the old woman had a special and rather more protracted leave-taking. He was charged with many messages for his family.

"Dear!" thought the old serving-woman to herself, as she stood in the doorway watching them out of sight, "how he does remind me of my dead lady! If he was the eldest and could marry Miss Judith!"

"I can't stand that soldier at any price," Sir Paul de Visors was remarking at the same moment to Mr. O'Rorke. It is odd how different points of view are.

"Beke? Can't you now? Well, don't tell Miss Money Bags, that's all."

"And why not?" demanded Sir Paul loftily.

"Because she'll sit on you," replied Gerry frankly; "she's dead nuts on him, so's Judy."

"I don't agree with you at all," declared the baronet.

"That," observed the attaché, "is not the point."

He fell to whistling softly. He had no objection to being in opposition; he had a national tendency to it.

"You've got hold of the wrong end of the stick as usual," insisted de Visors.

"Ah!" remarked his friend, smiling gently.

He moved forward and overtook Miss Hartington.

"Would you mind defending me," he asked, "if de Visors goes for me? He is longing to punch my head."

She laughed; the young Hibernian was big and stalwart, and looked peculiarly well able to defend himself.

"What's the matter?" she asked.

"Oh! Awfully raggy. He don't like our new friend."

"That does not seem to be a sufficient reason for assaulting you."

"No. That, of course, is what I shall urge before the magistrate. But I told him you were deadly gone on Beke."

"How sweet of you!"

"Oh, and Judy too! I said you were drawing lots for him all church-time. That's what ragged him."

They both laughed whole-heartedly; nobody ever took Gerry seriously.

CHAPTER XV

On Easter Monday the two young ladies and the three young men hunted. The elders of the party drove to the meet, which was at Bardon Cross, about four miles from Eresby.

This Easter Monday meet was a special institution, and everybody from that side of the county came to it. On the way two villages had to be passed through, and both belonged to Lord Wydgate. Over the cottage doors were stone slabs, with a date and a crowned lion, the Beke crest. Some had the coroneted initial, but all proclaimed their vassalage to the great family of Eresby.

Osric was introduced to half Rentshire at the meet. Anywhere else he would have been a subaltern in a rather smart regiment, but here he was something more, and he felt it to be so.

This local importance was quite agreeable; but Mr. Beke did not forget that it was, in the first place, a tribute to the head of his house. Still, the cadet of a house to which tribute is

paid may be forgiven for not finding the tribute disagreeable.

Osric passed muster very well.

He was a fine young man, with a high-bred face that was almost handsome. His clothes were always above criticism, and he rode excellently. It was a peculiar and rather unusual feature in him that he did several things very well for which he did not specially care. Thus he shot very well indeed, without being at all an enthusiast concerning that form of sport: nor was he really enthusiastic about riding; nevertheless he had a first-rate seat, fine nerve, and faultless hands. A little later on, in India, he made an unusually good polo-player; and yet he never cared for the game so much as other men who had not half his success or skill.

Though the meet at Bardon Cross was rather what Gerry O'Rorke called "a parlour meet" and de Visors described as "a gallery day," it produced on this occasion very excellent sport. And most people observed that the sport was not wasted on Lord Wydgate's nephew.

Sir Paul had not taken a liking to the new guest, but he admitted that the soldier was a good man on a horse, and a good man with hounds too, which is of course a different matter altogether.

Gerry O'Rorke had no prejudice against Beke, but all his critical faculties were always roused against a man on a horse; nevertheless he "passed" Osric without reservation.

Both Miss Van Arnhem and Miss Hartington enjoyed hunting, though the former was the better horsewoman, and had a prettier seat.

There is no way of seeing a country better than hunting it; and Osric had a very good notion of East Rentshire by the time he and Miss Hartington were riding home to Eresby through the empty lanes. They had been together at the finish, and had, of course, plenty to say to each other about the run.

"You're a tremendous sportswoman," observed Mr. Beke half surprised. Somehow she had not conveyed that idea to him.

"I expect," she replied, "some grandfather of mine must have been a sort of Jorrocks. It seems to be in my blood. It was awfully hard on your cousin, her horse falling lame just then."

It was Miss Van Arnhem whose horse had gone lame; so Osric knew who was meant by his cousin. But he did not consider her any sort of relation. It always rather irritated him to hear her calling his uncle "papa," though he knew that many step-daughters do so.

"Miss Van Arnhem rides very well," he answered.

"Splendidly. And she never looks so well as on a horse."

But Mr. Beke, with a wisdom beyond his years, never discussed a girl's appearance with another girl.

"I wonder if she went home this way," he remarked, instead. "If so we ought to overtake her."

"No. She would go by Luxham Spinney and Clouds." She pointed towards a high sky-line to the north, where one saw a desolate-looking tower black against the sky.

"Is that a church? It seems an odd place for one."

"No. It's called 'Clouds.' There is nothing but the tower; but they say it was a castle once. It belonged to a family called Blood; they used to be big people about here. But one stormy winter night a pedlar knocked there asking shelter, and, on trying the door, found that it was open and walked in. Lady Blood lay just inside the door—murdered—as though she had struggled so far towards escape."

"Who had murdered her?"

"Her son and her husband. The pedlar, in spite of the sleet and the wind, ran out in

terror, and came down to Luxham with his ghastly news. It was very late then, but they organized a party and set off up the windy hill to Clouds. The poor lady still lay where the pedlar had seen her, the corridor was hung with old tapestry and it was torn and stained by her poor fingers, as if she had tried to pull it down to twist about herself, or, as if she had thought she could pull herself up out of reach of her murderers. All the wounds were in her back."

"But how did they know who had done it?"

"That's almost the most horrible part of the story. When the pedlar came back with the others he declared that the body did not look just as he had seen it before, and that it was a little nearer to the door. It seemed as though she had not been quite dead when he saw her first. But now, at any rate, she was dead; and she had written with her own finger, dipped in her own blood, on the white flags of the hall 'Jude' and 'Mar.' Her husband's name was Jude, and her elder son's Marmaduke. On the strength of that grim witness a search was made all over the county, and father and son were both found that same night, hiding in a great rick of hay."

"Were they hanged? Did they confess?"

"They were not hanged; they were not

taken alive. But I think they confessed, for they set the hayrick on fire and were burned in it. . . . No one has ever lived at Clouds since. The younger son went off to Moat, another house of their family in West Rentshire, and that has been the head-quarters of the Bloods ever since. All this happened nearly two hundred years ago."

It was a grim tale: and the lonely tower on the bald ridge had a black and bad look. Osric was silent, thinking of the story. No motive had been hinted at, and only one was possible for such a crime.

It was ghastly to think of the wretched woman helpless in the avenging hands of her two murderers, in that desolate tower among the driving sleet and wreathing cloud of yonder wild ridge. The county all around was rich and prosperous. About the bare ridge a chill and naked bleakness lowered. But Mr. Beke only half pitied the murdered woman. If it was as he supposed, her own crime had been what he would always think the worst that can be committed.

A clatter of hoofs made them both turn and glance back. It was a lady, and she seemed determined to overtake them.

"Why, it's your friend Mrs. Freke," remarked Miss Hartington, mentioning the name

of a lady to whom he had been introduced that morning at the meet, and with whom he had chatted for perhaps ten minutes.

He laughed.

"Yes, I think it is."

There was no time to disclaim, if he had wished, any special right to be called this lady's friend. She drew up alongside.

"I saw you in front of me all up Chardon Hill," she said. "I willed that you should turn round and wait for me. But it didn't come off."

Mr. Beke looked rather as if there was a will of his own to reckon with.

"You seemed frightfully absorbed about something," continued Mrs. Freke. "I never saw two backs look so engrossed."

"Miss Hartington was telling a ghost story," said Osric, "and we *were* rather taken up with it."

He glanced again across the rolling pastures to where the black tower of Clouds stands out against the sky.

"Oh, she has been telling you that? Fortunately Sir Francis Jeune settles that sort of thing now-a-days. It may cost more, but it's not so uncomfortable."

Mrs. Freke laughed, a short, not very mirthful, laugh.

Neither of the others laughed at all. Miss Hartington did not approve of Mrs. Freke; Mr. Beke was coldly wondering whether she was as nasty as she seemed. She looked rather silly, and he concluded with considerable wisdom and charity that she probably was not.

Mrs. Freke was, perhaps, eight or nine and twenty years of age, and she might have been goodish-looking; but she was made-up, which spoilt her appearance and caused people to add ten years to her age. She belonged to East Rentshire, but was married to a man in India.

She did not after all remain long in the company of Osric and Miss Hartington. They came to some cross-roads, with a sign-post, one arm of which pointed out the way to Steeple Marsden.

"Well, this is my best way," she said, "so good-night. Do you hunt with the L.L. to-morrow? So do I. Hope Lady Blood won't look you up to-night, Mr. Beke; but I dare say she's learned discretion by now. She must be about two hundred years old by this time."

With another of her short, chill laughs Mrs. Freke nodded to her companions, and turned her horse sharply into the Marsden lane. Her nod to Osric was friendly, almost intimate; that to Miss Hartington was curt and almost impertinent.

"She can't bear me," remarked that lady, "and I must say she is quite right, for I can't bear her."

"She seemed very keen for your company," observed Osric demurely.

"For mine? Oh, I was not alone, you see. I dare say she does not dislike *you*."

"As I was only introduced to her to-day, she scarcely knows me well enough to be justified in dislike."

"That," said the girl, "sounds very modest."

Mr. Beke said that he *was* very modest, but not as if insisting on being believed.

"Who *is* Mrs. Freke?" he asked.

"She was a Miss Prance. Her father is the Rector of Marsden,—over there. She married a soldier in the Indian Army, a major, I think he is. And she's home 'on furlough,' as she calls it. She goes back in a few weeks, when the hunting is all over. That was her father to whom I saw Lord Wydgate introduce you."

"Yes, I know, and he introduced me to his daughter; but I could not hear either name."

"Her overtaking us just then was rather odd. And I was uncomfortable when you began to tell her we had been discussing the Clouds murder. For the poor Lady Blood who was murdered was a Miss Alicia Prance, of Mrs. Freke's own family. The Prances are

small yeomen-squires just over the border in the next county."

"I must say," replied Osric, "she did not seem very sensitive. You need scarcely mind."

They trotted gently over a strip of turf that lined the road for a few hundred yards. Then fell into a walk again.

"You seem very well posted up in East Rentshire matters," said Mr. Beke at last.

"Oh, well—I live a good deal in it. Did you not know? I have had Weldon Paddocks for the last two seasons. Lord Wydgate says I ought to buy it."

"Weldon Paddocks; doesn't it belong to Lord Verdun?"

"Yes. But he'd sell it sharp enough. He'd sell his grandmother if any one would buy her and she was not entailed. His other place, Beaumanor, is."

In the hall at Eresby they found Miss Van Arnhem and Sir Paul de Visors, just as Osric had found them on Saturday. It seemed impossible to believe that that was only the day before yesterday. It struck Mr. Beke that Miss Van Arnhem was rather cross; but that did not seem to him inexcusable: for a keen sportswoman, mounted on a very good horse, to lose the best part of the best run of the day was certainly annoying.

The special footman told off to attend to Mr. Beke had everything ready for him. There was a well-established fire in his room, and on the hearthrug a big bath with plenty of hot water. The man brought him fresh tea at once.

The footman treated Mr. Beke with a peculiar deference and attention. A first-rate servant in a first-rate house will seem to do his best for any guest; but in some mysterious way the impression was conveyed that in Osric's case something more than mere guest-hood was recognized—that Mr. Beke was a son of the house; that he represented a hypothetic heirship.

CHAPTER XVI

A WHOLE family came to dinner that night, consisting of two bachelors and two old maids. They lived together on their ancestral acres, where there was just room for the four of them. And their name was Peel. All rejoiced in nicknames, for East Rentshire is a great place for them, and, of course, their own name lent itself to it. So did their appearance. The younger brother Orange Peel: Miss Tab, who had a tongue, was known in all East Anglia as *Candied* Peel, while—by a bold change of metaphor—the youngest, Miss Maddy, was called Muffled Peal. She was reputed to be delicate and was always much involved in wraps and respirators. Her Christian name was funnier than any nickname, for it was Madrida, which some pronounced Madreeda, and some *Mad Rider*. This fell appellation had been bestowed upon her because she was born in the capital of Spain, where her father had been Secretary of Legation.

Osric had to take Miss Tab in to dinner; on the other side he had Miss Van Arnhem.

"Mind you do not talk all the time to me," said that young lady, "or Miss Tab will let you know what Candied Peel is like!"

He assured her that such abandoned conduct was far from him. To prove it he turned to his right, and moving a *menu* nearer to the lady remarked that it was tiresome to eat ignorantly.

"It is bad to do anything ignorantly," replied Miss Tab.

Her tone admitted of no discussion. So Osric judged it prudent to pass on to another topic.

"Were you at the meet this morning?" he inquired. "I did not see you. But there were so many people."

"I was not. I would not countenance with my presence an assembly for such a fatuous and cruel purpose."

The lady was again so positive that Osric again thought it wise to pursue the theme no further. Miss Tab was disappointed: what she wanted was to contradict him.

"Can you deny that it is cruel?" she demanded fiercely, from behind the serried ranks of her coldly-false teeth.

Mr. Beke hinted gently that he would probably not hunt if he considered it cruel.

"Oh, I don't know! Where one's pleasure is concerned one is easily persuaded as to right or wrong."

"You have never hunted?" said Mr. Beke, demurely.

"Once, and once only. Against my better judgment I was persuaded to it—some year or two back, when I was a foolish girl."

It was easy to believe that a year or two had elapsed since. Miss Peel looked as though she had been forty for many years.

"And did you enjoy it?"

"Enjoy it! It was a day of terror, and ended in disaster; my horse threw me over his head into the ice-cold water of Chardon lake, and ran away and left me."

"That was indeed cruel. I had not understood that it was the cruelty of the horse you complained of."

Fortunately at this juncture a plate containing some turbot and shrimp sauce came between Osric and the lady. She gave it a good deal of her attention for some time.

Osric turned his to the left.

"I heard you," murmured Miss Van Arnhem. "Why you've all but come to fisticuffs already.

I was asking Gerry O'Rorke to go for the police."

"Is she always so unduly direct?" asked Osric.

"She's always Candied Peel. She knows it, and she prides herself on it."

"If I were she I should start something else to be proud of."

"It is due to her to explain that you did lead off with the most fatal of all subjects. Hunting is her pet abomination."

"Then why live in East Rentshire?"

"Because Quelham Hall is in East Rentshire. If you want to add to the excellent impression you've already made, tell her you've been to a bull-fight."

"But I never have," objected Mr. Beke.

"Well, ask her if she has."

Mr. Beke was rather annoyed with Miss Peel; and not altogether unwilling to see what would happen if he followed this suggestion. Turning again to the right, he said—

"I do not think we are really a cruel nation. If you had ever seen a bull-fight——"

"If! I have seen numbers," cried Miss Tab furiously. "I lived in Madrid five years. I should like to see every picador and matador in Spain killed."

This rhetoric sounded, like Mr. Tulliver's, rather sanguinary. But Mr. Beke was aware that those who profess an unusual tenderness for animals are apt to express a not very logical indifference to the sufferings of human beings.

For five minutes the lady's flood of eloquence flowed steadily on till it was stemmed by a *vol-au-vent* of oysters. Then Osric turned again to Miss Van Arnhem.

"My temerity," he said, "has been well chastised. Did she create the dumb animals herself, and has one hitherto been misinformed as to their origin?"

"It's a regular mania with her," explained Judith, "her exclusive care for the interests of animals. She positively hates children, because they have started a Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to them, and she considers it a rival to *her* society for preventing cruelty to animals. She would much rather see a man killed than a horse; and would let all her brethren perish rather than her abominable little mongrel Snip, who has the worst temper in Rentshire—after his missis."

"I wonder," said Osric, "if she thinks oysters are happier in a *vol-au-vent* than in the sea?"

Judith laughed.

"*She* takes care not to wonder. You'll see her eat *pâté de foie gras* too ; but you'll never see her get out and walk up a hill to ease the horses, but you've no idea how hot she is about it all. If she saw a sheep on its back and there was no one she could blame, she would like to apply for a summons against 'them as is above,' as Silas Marner called it."

Meanwhile Muffled Peal was happy in the conviction that she was catching her death chill. Behind her was a tall screen, and she decided that it stood before an open door, leading doubtless through draughty passages to the kitchens. There was, in fact, a solid wall with no door at all behind the screen, which was drawn in front of the carving-table. But the hypothetic door and its attendant draught were, for Miss Maddy Peel, the feature of the evening.

Very soon after dinner the guests departed, because Candied Peel dreaded lest her darling Snip should awake and miss her. She had, it appeared, mingled a mild sedative with his supper before coming out. Everybody was rather pleased when they were gone, which does not imply any particularly adverse criticism of them personally. A country-house party is

cohesive, and does not really invite any intersection of its circle from without. All entrance is apt to be secretly felt an invasion. Therefore it is perhaps a mistake on the part of hosts and hostesses to add these extraneous neighbours, and stiffen their pleasant party for dinner into a half-hearted dinner-party.

And yet no host or hostess can resist the temptation to do it. They have long owed a dinner to such or such a neighbour, and their houseful suggests an opportuneness for wiping the debt off.

Some such ideas were being expressed by Miss Hartington and Sir Paul de Visors between them, the latter insisting on the tiresomeness of these neighbourly intrusions, the young lady urging the host's utilitarian point of view.

"And now," said Gerry O'Rorke, cutting in as was his custom, "we close up again comfortably, like a polypus when it has spat out four dry sticks."

"Mr. Malaprop Ramsbotham," observed Miss Van Arnhem, also joining on, "probably alludes to an *octopus*."

They all laughed, and Mr. O'Rorke unblushingly asserted that he "said octopus."

Somebody, Lord Wydgate probably, sug-

gested that Miss Hartington should oblige the company with a song.

"Yes, do," urged everybody—Mr. O'Rorke included—except Sir Paul de Visors, who was yawning enormously, and could not do two things at once.

"Please, don't," begged the attaché, in a lower key. "But come and sit on the sofa here and talk to me."

"How rude you are," protested Miss Hartington, "without prejudice," however.

"Rude, is it? I'm the politest of the lot. They all want you to go and pipe some one else's whistle while they talk, and I want ye to come and say your own sweet words to me. It's de Visors there who's rude."

In spite of this appeal Miss Hartington did sing.

"Don't be making faces at me, Lady Wydgate," pleaded the irrepressible attaché, who regarded not the person of man, "may be the wind'll change. And I'm not speaking to anybody; if a word would save all your lives I wouldn't speak it."

He assumed an air of impenetrable and gloomy silence which was violated by a shriek of anguish from Lady Wydgate's dachshund.

"Ugh, ye mannerless worm-dog," whispered

Gerry, "raising yer own voice while a lady's singing. It's easy telling ye're a German."

But Graf does not choose to remain and argue the question. He removed his long-drawn flatness to a considerable distance from Mr. O'Rorke, and began licking the end of his tail with ostentatious sympathy for it.

Lord Wydgate was standing near Mr. Beke.

"I dare say," he said in a low voice, "that you think Gerry O'Rorke a mere buffoon. The truth is, he is an unusually capable young man, and Sir Vane Wordsworth (you know Gerry is attaché at Brussels) assures me that the boy is a very likely young diplomat."

Osric assumed an interest somewhat greater than he felt in the future of the Honourable Gerald O'Rorke. A young man of to-day is seldom violently concerned with the rosy prospects of a contemporary.

"One has to be deaf sometimes," added his uncle, "it doesn't do to be always frowning a lad's merry spirits down. So when Gerry's carry him too far Lady Wydgate and I attend to other matters."

"I wish," said Osric in his quiet way, "that you and Lady Wydgate would keep a school for Seniors; the Juniors would all send their parents and guardians to it."

After all it was much as Gerry O'Rorke had said : there was a good deal of smothered conversation while Miss Hartington's song was going on. Soon after it was over there was a move to bed. The hunters were to have an early breakfast. Osric gave Lady Wydgate her candle, and as she took it she too said a word or two about the Irish attaché.

"Isn't he a rattle? But he is the best boy in the world, and dear Lady Athlone's Benjamin. You know she was a cousin of Judith's father. There's plenty of sense behind all his nonsense ; and though he pretends he can scarcely talk English he makes a good deal already by writing it. And Sir Vane Wordsworth tells us that he is a first-rate linguist."

"In fact," puts in Miss Van Arnhem, "he is the Admirable Crichton of the Bog of Allen. Mamma, you have decided me ; I shall propose to him to-morrow."

"I don't believe he'll accept you," says Lady Wydgate.

He had himself overheard from a surprising distance ahead, in spite of an animated discussion with Miss Hartington, in the fervour of which he pours out libations of liquid wax from his candle.

"Refuse Judy, is it?" he called down the

stairs. "Now I do hope she'll save me the bolus of a refusal. "I'm after accepting Miss Hartington here—conditionally, of course."

"Conditionally on my asking you!" laughed that charming young lady.

"Exactly," says Gerry, streaming more waxen libations at her feet.

CHAPTER XVII

THE L.L. country lies west of Eresby, mostly over the border into Daleshire, and as everybody knows is hunted by Lord Lutterworth. The nearest of its meets to Eresby is at Market Lowton, and that was where they met on the morning after the Peel family dined at Lord Wydgate's.

Market Lowton is a very small village, with a very large church, and also a very large goose-green. On the goose-green, between the big church and the little river Ere, the meets take place. From Eresby to Lowton is about nine miles, and the East Rentshire Hunt people always declared that nine miles in the L.L. country had much more than eighteen half-miles in them.

A Market Lowton meet was not generally a gallery day; but on Easter Tuesday, with so many big houses full for the holidays, it was bound to be a bigger meet than usual.

Though it was Easter Tuesday it was only the 27th of March, whence if the reader is

clever he will soon find out what the year was. And the morning was wintry. A stiff white frost covered the grass, and showed up myriads of cobwebs that would otherwise have been invisible. And the wind came gasping down from the north with a plain threat of snow between its teeth.

"There's the sun, glory be to God!" cried Mr. O'Rorke with national thankfulness.

"Gerry," said Miss Van Arnhem severely, "be more reticent. It is better that your thankfulness should be *understood.*"

"All right, Miss Judy! Next time ye give me a leg up or lend me a drink out of your sherry-flask, devil a bit of a 'thank you' will ye get. My gratitude'll just be understood."

The sun made everything very pretty. The hedges glittered with countless points of crystal. And the hard road rang cheerily against the irons of their horses' twenty feet. There was not much wind, only little frigid puffs occasionally.

"Now, Judy," said Mr. O'Rorke, "tell your cousin all about the L.L."

He liked to call Osric her cousin, as he perceived it irritated that gentleman.

"Well," began Miss Van Arnhem, "first of all there's the Master. He's called Lord Lutterworth."

"'Deed then he's never called that," interrupted Gerry, "he's called Chinny Cussum."

Judith laughs, she cannot contradict this.

"The former," explained Mr. O'Rorke, "on account of his chin, the latter by reason of the language that flows over it."

"He has the most enormous chin you ever saw," said Judith.

"He's all chin," declared Gerry, "up to his eyebrows. And so it's there his mouth has to be. His moustache is on the top of his forehead and his nose is over the brow of the hill where ye'd be looking for his hair, but it slipped down behind on to the nape of his neck."

When they reached Lowton Green Osric found that their description was not unreasonably exaggerated. Lord Lutterworth had a chin that really started half up his face, and his language was as destructive as a hurricane.

"That," said Gerry, pointing out a very short man of enormous bulk who was waddling about the green talking to every one, "is Salmon Peel. He's a cousin of the other Peels, and he's called Salmon Peel because there is supposed to be something fishy about him."

"He's all overcoat," explained Judith, "he's tiny inside them all."

"No doubt," suggested Osric, "*he* would

have been called Muffled Peel if the name had been unoccupied."

"Look," said the attaché eagerly, "now he's beginning to take them off. When he's done you'll see there's nothing left of him—like a bottle of patent medicine when you've pulled off the surrounding advertisements."

A fat man with a ludicrously dolorous expression walked his horse up to them and began to make himself agreeable to the two ladies. Mr. Beke began to observe an aroma as of a recently polished parquet. Mr. O'Rorke laughed softly.

"It's *him*," he whispered, as heedless of grammar as the ecclesiastic of Rheims. "That's Drag Finch. He is kilt with rheumatism, and he spends all his time, when he's not hunting, embrocating himself with horse-Elliman. When he thrusts a bit, old Chinny Cussum swears he'll borrow him for a drag on a by-day."

Other notabilities moved by, and Gerry or Miss Van Arnhem explained them all.

"That," said the former, looking towards a lanky Diana on a weedy grey, "is Mrs. Bruce. See her plaits? She swears she can sit in them—says they'll go below her waist. As low as she likes to chuck them. She used to pocket them if the running was hard and the country stiff; but once she forgot, and that

very day she took a back toss on to a stone and they saved her life. She keeps them all on since out of gratitude. And here," he concluded, "comes your friend."

Mr. Beke, who saw most things as soon as other people, was already aware of the approach of Mrs. Freke. He did not exactly dislike O'Rorke, but at that moment he would have liked to see him conveyed to a deaf and dumb asylum.

Miss Van Arnhem had heard the allusion also, and was visibly annoyed.

Mrs. Freke arrived in a Ralli car, driven by herself with a rakish-looking groom alongside. She nodded to several men, and told one of them that he looked full of beans. The Master was close by and he gave her back one of her own nods, whereupon she inquired effusively for Lady Madge, his youngest sister.

"Isn't she coming out to-day? What a pity. Looks like sport rather."

Now all Daleshire and the world were aware that Lady Madge had recently married a veterinary surgeon, and was taboo and anathema. The Master turned away furious.

"I'll teach him to nod to me," says Mrs. Freke in a loud aside, to one of her masculine acquaintances, climbing out of the Ralli car, and making for her huge, bad-looking chestnut.

Her chum laughed.

"Well, I think it *was* you who taught him," her companion declared unkindly.

Presently the clock in the unduly big church strikes, very deliberately, and with much preliminary whirring and creaking: as if it protested against the flight of time and did what it could to retard it.

Five minutes later the goose-green was given back to the legitimate geese whose it was, and the L.L. hunt straggled down a broad green lane, that at first seemed merely a prolongation of it.

Mrs. Freke was a long way in front, for which Osric was rather grateful to her.

Miss Van Arnhem rode next him, but she was less talkative than on the way to Lowton. Perhaps she had talked herself out for the present. Gerry came close behind with Miss Hartington alongside him; he gave *his* tongue no holiday. For some reason Mr. Beke thought of the grasshopper which the preacher found to be a burden, and wondered if it were an Irish grasshopper.

They drew Lowton Bolton first, and drew it blank, which was rather unusual. A good deal of time was wasted thus, and the Master got explosive and sulphurous. The more timid edged off from him, and courted nothing so little as his notice.

Again they straggled away, to draw some place that sounds like Hoseybad, but Mr. Beke did not clearly catch the name, and thought it possible that the whip's rendering of it and that on the map might be different. It turned out to be a shallow vale beween two pastures with an indication of an obsolete osier-bed in the bottom. Here they find and get away, and fairish sport is shown over a medium country. But the scent is not first-rate, and, as Mrs. Freke remarks to her nearest swain, "Lady Madge didn't lose a lot, after all."

After this by no means brilliant run two covers were drawn blank, and they seemed a long way apart. The infected area round Lord Lutterworth widened visibly; and some of the less keen and more timid awaited favourable opportunities for going home. None of all this was lost on the rough-tongued, keen-witted Master. It half hurt him and he half enjoyed it. He doesn't mind the weeding out, and he thinks the trepidation which he inspires is a sign of power. Cleverer men than the swearing Earl have made the same mistake, and hugged themselves in it.

Soon after these fallings off a quick find was followed by a quick run, and a kill in the open, eminently satisfactory to the moderate, who would have scorned to slink off with the

amateurs, but who did not find it incumbent on them to stick on now. Their homes were far away in the East Rentshire country, and they chose to flatter themselves that they had seen the best sport of the day—not grand, but good enough to redeem it from flatness. So they went.

"And now," says "Chinny Cussum" to the inner Cabinet of his hunt, "for Gossy Hill."

And he laughed, with a smile on his mouth like a gleam of sunshine high up on a slate quarry. The metaphor, it is fair to confess, was Mr. O'Rorke's.

Gossy Hill was not very near, and when they reached it Gerry declared that in any other country it would be nothing in life but a valley. It is in fact singularly like a valley, being just a shallow depression in an elevated country with a low mound in the middle, nearly circular and covered with raggy gorse.

Here a fox was soon found, and thereupon ensued the run that made Gossy Hill ever memorable in the annals of the L.L.

CHAPTER XVIII

For some time Mr. Beke had been looking about for Miss Van Arnhem. The famous run was over and now it remained to get home.

When he found her he was startled ; for he found her in a field, lying very still and with no horse in sight.

When he got near she opened her eyes ; the thud of his horse's feet on the turf seemed to rouse her. But she was only half herself, and had a rather dazed look.

"I hope it wasn't a bad spill?" he asked anxiously, as he jumped down.

He felt a fool ; a man generally does in such a case, and very justly ; he mostly is.

"Yes," she answered not quite at ease, and speaking with a sort of stupid slowness. "I took a toss . . . as Gerry would say."

She looked up into his face, and the expression in it made her laugh. Masculine sympathy in its fairest exposition is not easily distinguished from annoyed embarrassment.

He was much relieved to hear her laugh, though he did not laugh himself.

"Gerry would say," she continued, after another little pause, "that it all comes from not having borrowed Mrs. Bruce's plaits."

It must not be supposed that Miss Van Arnhem was still lying flat upon her back. She had sat up when Osric came, and was staring rather dismally at her foot.

"Did he fall on it? Do you remember what happened?" inquired Mr. Beke.

"No, I don't think he did. I don't quite remember what did happen. I wonder where he is."

That is precisely what Osric had been wondering—among a lot of other things: such as how many leagues it might be to Eresby, and how on earth Miss Van Arnhem was to be got there.

"If you could find him," she observed, with a vaguely comprehensive glance at the surrounding country, "I could ride home."

It seemed, in an unreasonable way, rather heartless to leave her: but he went. He seemed to be gone a very long while.

"She *is* a horrid woman," said Judith aloud: when there is no one to listen it does not matter about being irrelevant.

Ultimately Osric came back, and by good luck with her horse in tow.

It was not quite so easy as she had thought to get up into the saddle again. It was the stirrup-foot she had hurt. Mr. Beke's assistance had to be something more than formal. When she was well up he purposely lost some little time in mounting himself. After a few minutes in the saddle she felt better.

"You look better now," he remarked, with obvious satisfaction.

"How did I look at first?" she asked, with rising interest in her own adventure.

"I was half afraid when I caught sight of you. I thought, as O'Rorke would say, that you were the late Miss Van Arnhem."

She laughed.

"You have fallen into the local habit," she said, "of ascribing all your pleasantries to Gerry. We all do it tentatively till we see how they are received. If they do well we take them over ourselves."

"I must say," he observed presently, "that I should like to know how far it is to Eresby."

Miss Van Arnhem looked round as if taking stock of landmarks.

"It is better not to inquire," she said. "We can't possibly hope to get there before to-morrow night."

"I should be delighted," he replied, "if it were not for your foot." This was, for Mr.

Beke, a very gushing speech, and they both recognized the fact. "I can see," he added, "that you are in pain all the while."

"What bothers *me*," she declared, stoutly, "is the weather. It's going to do something startling. I can't think what."

The horses ambled gently on: their riders scanned the low, milky sky.

"Snow," suggested Osric, grimly.

She believed he was right.

"Snow on the 27th of March," she said, "is in the worst possible taste."

He quite agreed with her. He detested snow, and it generally made his perfidious liver behave outrageously.

"When I was a child," she told him, "I went crazy with joy over the *first* snow of a winter. Up here in the North Midlands we generally get a sharp fall about the end of October: my brother and I used to watch it out of the window of the oak corridor, and we always rejoiced in it. He liked best to see it dancing round and round in the quadrangle, but I thought it nicer to look out over the park and over the lake, and watch the deer come crowding up near the house."

A belt of oak spinney lay along the road here, and the wind made weird and stealthy whisperings in the naked, shivering branches.

"You knew I had a brother once?" she asked him presently.

He told her that he had known this.

"Oh dear!" she said, "I do wish that he had not died."

They rode on in silence, and the leaden darkness stooped lower and lower.

"He was only a year older than I," she added, after a pause, "and we were boon companions. He was cheery, handsome, and very kind, and so amusing. I think papa felt his death as if it had been his own son."

"What was he called?"

"His *name* was Derek; but we never called him that. Our nicknames, when those whom we called by them are dead, sound strange, don't they?—we called him Piggy."

She laughed, sadly enough: and continued—

"I am glad he did not die here. He died on the *Britannia*. I never saw him afterwards. So you see, I never altogether understood about his being dead. Only I miss him. It seems to me a good expression to say we have 'lost people': it encourages us to think of finding them again at last."

"It is because of your brother, I dare say," remarked Osric, "that you feel as you do about Eresby. Because it was where you and he were children."

She turned towards him quickly.

"It is rather nice of you to say that," she answered. "It is true. But I did not quite think you would have known."

As she turned her face he noticed how pale it was. They were riding at a footpace, walking their horses gently; but still her foot was causing her great pain. Just then there came the roll of wheels and Judith, looking back, declared with delight that it was Dr. Hart's brougham.

"He's finishing his rounds and he'll take me back to Eresby. You don't mind, do you?"

She admitted now that the stirrup jarred her foot badly. She had begun to fear that she might faint.

"He'll take me home much quicker in his brougham," she added, "and you'll get home quicker too, for you need not walk your horse. I only hope taking Saracen won't bore you."

She was quite right. It was Dr. Hart, and he was delighted to take Miss Van Arnhem home. He had doctored her since she was almost a baby, and was devoted to her. He was a shrewd, clever man, and a good doctor, with not an aspirate in his dictionary, or a false pretension in his nature.

"*Your* shortest way," he called out to Osric, "is straight through Fenny Lowton and 'ome over Clouds. It's three miles further 'ome by

the coach-road : but Clouds 'ill's impossible for carriage traffic. It's an 'ill an' a 'arf."

Dr. Hart was well aware who Mr. Beke was. Nobody ever came to stay within ten miles of his neat house at Corby without his hearing of it ; and Dr. Hart knew the peerage of his county by heart.

"That's your cousin," he remarked as they rolled away. He had already got her boot off ; and her foot, wrapped in a rug, was resting on the seat opposite.

"He's not my cousin," she replied, "he's papa's nephew."

"*I* know who he is. 'E's Sir Lionel's second son ; and it's a pity but what 'e's the eldest."

The keen old grey eyes were watching the girl's face inquisitively.

"Yes, we all say that," she replied carelessly ; "his lordship has fallen in love with him."

"Oh," says the doctor, "is it his lordship?"

Judith laughed.

"Oh, not only him," she said, "all the rest of us, as well."

"So I partly 'eard," remarked the doctor, sententiously.

She laughed again.

"You know very well," she declared, "that you have heard nothing at all about it. . . . I'm thinking," she added, "of making up a match

between him and Miss Hartington. Don't you think it would be a first-rate plan? You are devoted to Freda, and you know she has heaps of money."

"On the 'ole," said Doctor Hart, sagely, "I begin to regret 'aving overtaken you and your cousin. It's a pity but what I went round by 'Olly Corner, and 'Igh Marsden."

CHAPTER XIX

MEANWHILE Mr. Beke had the lane to himself. It was much colder, and much darker; not with the straightforward darkness of night, but the menacing, leaden blackness of a beating storm. It was a much more treeless country than that on the other side of Eresby; bleaker altogether. One could see that it was a poor, cold soil. And Osric was not surprised to read on a sign-post that the nearest village was called Cold Marsden.

"Not," he said to himself "that it can be a very distinguishing distinction."

The pasture looked lean and watery. The country was flatter; not so rolling as about Eresby: but it really lay much higher; it was a shelving table-land, shelving up eastwards to Clouds.

Mr. Beke half grudged the prosperous doctor the cheery companion he had carried off. He did not know that the doctor was himself announcing his misgivings at having broken up their *tête-à-tête*. Neither, of course, did he

know that Miss Hartington and Gerry O'Rorke were also discussing him, as they rode home—much further on their way. To be accurate, they were discussing both him and Miss Van Arnhem.

"It is interesting to watch," Mr. Rorke was saying; "when it's all over it will have been interesting to have seen the start."

"And you think she will marry him?" inquired Miss Hartington with some interest.

"Not," replied he, with one of his flashes of genius, "unless he will marry her."

She laughed.

"Ah, well! No doubt out of Ireland it takes two to make a marriage."

"Wait a bit then, Miss Hartington. It takes two to get married, but one makes the marriage, in general. In this case there'll be two voices in it."

"I thought," she said, "that you'd have been more cut up about it."

He laughed gaily.

"You're a sharp girl—saving your presence, Miss Hartington," he said. "But I'm like the sporting-boy and smile while the snake's gnawing my vittles."

Mr. Rorke's speech did not cause his companion to cease laughing immediately.

"It's no use at all crying for the moon," he

went on, "and if Judy has the bad taste to prefer that long-legged soldier, bad cess to her."

"You think she's too good for him?"

"I don't see as yet that he is good enough for her," replied Gerry.

"I must say," admitted Miss Hartington, "that I like Mr. Beke."

"And I must say," declared Mr. O'Rorke, "that I like Judy a deal better."

"Oh, well, you're a man," she observed comprehensively.

"And you're a woman," he retorted, "or will be, please God, if you live to grow up."

"That," says Miss Hartington, "is not my fault."

"No," flashed Gerry, smartly, "it's my misfortune."

"Gerry," pleaded she, "*you're not going to flirt with me?*"

"'Deed then I had some notion of it."

"Oh! think better of it."

He promised he would, and they drifted into other topics.

As Miss Hartington's maid was dressing her hair that evening before dinner, the former reconsidered this little conversation with the Irishman.

"I begin," she told herself, to "find him

interesting." As a matter of fact she had begun before; but had left off again. Perhaps she would recommence.

But Osric was still many miles from home.

He had arrived at cross-roads with no sign-post, or rather with a sign-post that kept its local knowledge to itself. There were three arms, but the rain of many winters had obliterated all the information. Which road led to Clouds?

"When in doubt," said Mr. Beke to himself, "light a cigarette."

To do so was not easy. The wind drove bitterly, and there was no shelter.

By the time he had got the cigarette alight, he heard the clink of horse-hoofs on the stony road, and almost before he had time to wonder whether it will be a stranger or an acquaintance, Mrs. Freke comes clattering round the corner.

Perhaps she too was wishing herself safe at home; if so, Mr. Beke seconded her wishes very heartily. She could no doubt tell him the way, but he would rather have trusted to chance to find it.

Nevertheless there was no escape.

"Hulloa! Mr. Beke! All alone; and what have you done with Miss Hartington?"

She glanced at the horse he was leading.

"Are you looking for her?"

"Me? Anything but."

She gave one of her cheerless laughs. He coldly explained that the horse was Miss Van Arnhem's and how he came to be leading it.

"And she left you, and went off with the doctor! What a shame: *I* should have stuck to you."

"On the contrary," said Mr. Beke, very truthfully, "I should have insisted on your leaving me."

She laughed again.

"I dare say you would," she retorted. "Well, this is the way for both of us."

And they moved off, up a windy lane with a sort of fallow waste on either side, and no fences.

"I'll tell you what," she said presently, "my girths want tightening. Would you do it?"

They pulled up and he dismounted. The sound of an approaching horseman again made itself heard out of the wind, and by the time Osric was tightening the girth a man in pink passed.

He and Mrs. Freke exchanged some kind of greeting, not very cordial on either side.

"That's Tommy Langlip," she said, almost before he had passed, "the biggest gossip in

Rentshire. It's a blessing I've no character left to lose, or he'd canter off with it on that cow-backed sorrel of his."

Mr. Beke helped her to remount, and did the same himself. It is to be feared that the lady found him but indifferent company.

In twenty minutes they were on the ridge of Clouds. But before they reached it the storm burst, a raving turmoil of sleety snow and wind.

"I'll tell you what," she shouted. "This is too bad to last. I'll shelter in the old tower. If you don't care to wait you can get on; of course I know my way, and I don't think you can miss yours now."

Mr. Beke would much rather have taken her at her word, but that was impossible. She was the sort of woman whom he absolutely could not abide: she could scarcely speak without disgusting him. And yet he was a man, and must carry a man's handicap. Part of that weighting, he felt, is to be lacking in no courtesy to any woman.

It never occurred to him that there could be any possibility of leaving her, as things stood. They made their way to the tower, which looked more forlorn and more ill-omened the nearer they got to it. It was half ruinous,

and there were neither windows nor doors. But there was still a roof, for it was of lead, and time's buffets had not hurt it much, and the walls, though crumbling and mouldering, were thick enough.

He took all three horses and found an arched entrance, through which he led them into a draughty, low, broad room that was once a kitchen. He tied them to some rusty hooks that he found and went to look for her. She had rushed through the first door she had seen, on the weather side of the house.

She almost ran into his arms.

"Oh," she gasped, "I am so glad to see you again!"

If he could not re-echo the sentiment, there was at least no mistaking its genuineness.

"What is the matter?" he asked in a voice a little less cold than usual. He looked down at the white face, and shuddering, half-drenched figure.

She was a very small woman, and the sleet and wind had made sad havoc with her complexion and her hair. Nevertheless in her piteous plight he found her less intolerable. There was more suggestion of a real woman.

"What is the matter?" he repeated; and his voice sounded almost kindly.

Even while he was speaking a frantic drift of storm, white with snow, and black with the falling night, broke against them, and catching this corner of the tower whirled round and round in a raving frenzy. For a moment it nearly carried her off her feet.

"Come in here," he gasped, drawing her towards the door through which she had come.

"No, no, no!" she cried, "not in there. Not in there again!"

She turned and fled, and he was fain to follow. In a few moments they were on the more sheltered side of the tower, and he had brought her in to the low arched room where the horses were shivering.

"What is it?" he asked again, half irritated and half compassionate.

"Oh," she gasped, "that was the front door —that was where I went first. And I saw her —and I heard her."

Mr. Beke had no sort of belief in ghosts. He could not easily believe that any one else had a genuine faith in them. But he did not for a moment accuse this woman of pretence. She was doubtless a fool: but she utterly believed what she had just said.

Of course he remembered the grim story of the place well enough. And the place would

be grim without any such horrible tradition to wrap an atmosphere of dread and crime about it. The tower of Clouds would be a lowering and sinister place on a summer's noon: no sunshine could rob it of its malign and dark suggestions. But on such an evening as this!

He did not draw back unkindly, though this woman, whom he could not stand, piteous in her besmirched paint and her bedraggled yellow locks, cowered close to him.

She cast furtive and suspicious glances round. It was almost dark in the ruined room, with its black walls and stooping black roof. Darkest of all was the deep recess of the dead hearth, where no home-fire would burn again for ever.

The crushing desolation of it all weighed on the spirit. It has been said that Osric was not imaginative, still less was he fanciful. But the brooding weight of this place and its bad tradition pressed even on him.

He thought of the ugly story, and he looked at the ruin all around. No doubt the Bloods were important people hereabouts once, as proud perhaps of their family as the neighbouring Bekes of Eresby are of theirs. Two things were preached by all the forlorn desolation—the ruin of a hearth, the ruin of a race. And who had done it? In his eyes it was such a crime as

few could parallel: for he had an almost Roman idea of the sanctity of such things—of name and home. Who had really destroyed them in this ruined and cursed place? The wretched woman who had been so brutally punished.

He had such pity for her fate as a manly man must ever have for a defenceless and weak woman at such a pass. But no more than that. To his classic notions she had deserved punishment.

For what had been her crime he had no ruth and no condonement. And what was rarer, and perhaps less Roman, in his stern judgment such crime was unpardonable in man or woman alike. In some things, especially outward and apparent things, Osric belonged to his own day: in some others he seemed to belong to a plainer, simpler, more elemental age.

As he thought of these matters he seemed to harden, rather unjustly, towards the woman who cowered so near him as almost to touch him.

Presently she did touch him.

In one corner of the room there was another door, an inner door leading up into the tower. On this southern side the ground was lower than on the northern face, where the low main entrance door had been. From the kitchen

several broken steps led up towards that other side.

His back was turned to these: Mrs. Freke faced them. Suddenly she gripped his arm and into her scared face came such a look of horror as he had never seen. Probably in his conventional, modern life he had never seen horror written on any woman's face at all. And from the cowering woman's parted lips there came a shriek so sharp, so startling, that the horses leaped and plunged, dragging at their fastenings.

"Oh! Oh! She's there, behind you," wailed the woman, and he could feel her thin fingers pinching his arms like a vice.

He turned, as swiftly as he could, and a white figure was indeed disappearing into the doorway whence the steps led upwards.

A laugh followed: not from the living though half-dead woman who clung to him, but still a woman's laugh. And it was wicked. Nothing could be more hateful, more wicked, than that brief crackle of dry and ugly laughter.

"Stay," he said, not unkindly, but with a firm coldness, "I will go and see who it is."

She almost wept; she piteously begged him not to leave her alone there: but her terror was not merely for herself.

"Some horrible thing will happen to you if

you go," she urged, and undisguisedly tried to hold him back.

"Nonsense," he said, quietly enough; and he freed himself and hurried up the dark and broken stair after the echo of that evil laughter.

She crept after him, unable to remain alone. He had not far to go. At the top of the stairs they found themselves in the broad corridor leading to the former main entrance. It had been flagged with white stones, now broken.

Just inside the door stood a woman pointing back: and laughing, silently.

"Blood, Lady Blood!" she called out and laughed again, and pointed down at her feet, to the stained and broken flags. "Ah, ha! Lady Blood."

In a moment she had turned and fled, out into the deepening dusk. Once again came her ugly laugh, torn and flung abroad on the fleeing wind.

"Oh," cried Mrs. Freke, with a breaking sigh of relieved tension, "it was only Silly Sal. I never thought of her."

She explained that Silly Sal was the local idiot, a crazy woman who wandered round the villages begging, and pretending to sell cotton and such things.

"She was always cracky, but she was once very pretty and she found a husband. Only

he got tired of her wild ways and went off with some one else. That finished her."

The storm had partly passed; that is, it had whirled onwards with its tattered rags of snow and sleet. Only the chill wind continued to rush screamingly.

CHAPTER XX

When Mr. Beke walked into the dining-room at Eresby soup had gone away.

He was not shy or awkward, but he was annoyed. He knew they had waited for him; and he hated to be waited for. He was exceedingly punctual, and thought unpunctuality in another person's house the worst of bad manners. And it has been explained that Mr. Beke attached great weight to manners. It annoyed him extremely to have been forced to be unpunctual.

And Mr. Beke hated anything exceptional; he liked the sacred routine of orthodox custom, almost as much as he disliked the easy-going, bad manners of a certain class of person and society. He hated especially to be exceptional himself—even in so slight a matter as not coming in to a meal with the rest of the party, in the ordinary way.

He made his apology to Lady Wydgate, and one could see that in his steady, blue-grey eyes there was a sort of deepening, a shade, that

meant annoyance, though there was no confusion at all.

When he had made his apologies he sat down in the vacant chair, which on this occasion was next to Lady Wydgate herself. Then he looked round, refusing the soup a footman brought him. On his right was Miss Hartington, but she was talking to Mr. O'Rorke.

Miss Van Arnhem was some way off between Sir Paul de Visors and the Cabinet Minister. He was half surprised to see her at table.

"I am very glad," he said, turning to his aunt, "that Judith was able to come to dinner. I was almost afraid to hear that she had been obliged to remain in her room."

It was, as it happened, the first time he had called Lady Wydgate's daughter by her Christian name, though from the very first moment she had called him by his. To any one else he would have said "Miss Van Arnhem," but to her mother he could not do that.

One always catches one's own name, and Judith looked across. The fashion of her visage, he told himself, was changed. He was quite certain that in some way she already knew in whose company he had been since they parted.

He did not repeat his expression of gratification at seeing her in the dining-room. She was rather far off, and he would have had to raise his voice somewhat. Gerry O'Rorke would have yelled a remark to his sovereign, from one end of the table in St. George's Hall to the other, though all the Knights of the Garter intervened. But Mr. Beke was not at all like Mr. O'Rorke.

"It was most fortunate," he said, again speaking to his aunt, "that your doctor should drive along in his brougham. I am afraid she would not have been so well if she had had to ride home all the way. It was her stirrup-foot she hurt."

Lady Wydgate told herself that her husband's nephew had very good manners. Many people after keeping a company waiting for dinner can talk of nothing else: and bore you for half-an-hour with circumstantial evidence as to the authenticity of their excuses. Osric had made his brief but courteous apology, and was now taking it for granted that Miss Van Arnhem's slight mishap, and not his own tardy arrival, was the topic of interest.

"Her conscience rather pricked her at leaving you all alone with the two horses. . . . Did you have any difficulty about finding the way?"

"Only once. And then a good Samaritan came by who showed me the way—Mrs. Freke, I suppose you know her."

Lady Wydgate was amused ; quite unintentionally he had given the lady rather an apt name. For Mrs. Freke was certainly a Samaritan.

"We knew her mother better than we know her," observed his aunt, adding that Mrs. Freke had been married and living abroad for some time. Then, as if to relegate that lady courteously back to Samaria, Lady Wydgate said, "I am afraid you must have got utterly drenched."

"Part of the time," he replied, "we were in shelter ; we took refuge in the old tower of Clouds."

Lady Wydgate shuddered.

"What a place for such an evening! It must have been perfectly appalling."

"It was not unduly cheerful, I must admit," he answered, without, however, troubling her with further detail.

Lady Wydgate again rather admired her husband's nephew. She was, in reality, a cleverer woman than her daughter, with a much finer intuition. To her also Mrs. Freke was abominable, but her abhorrence was of the type ; there was nothing personal in her dislike. On the

other hand, she perceived that the horrors of Mrs. Freke had augmented within the last day or so as regarded her daughter—and perhaps as regarded Miss Hartington also. Now, she did not for one moment imagine that Osric was fascinated by the loud charms of the poor old parson's risky daughter. Perhaps, after all, Judith did not either.

But Judith might have had a lurking suspicion that Osric would not be proof against a proffered flirtation: many men flirt readily enough with women whom they recognize as out of the question. Lady Wydgate fell into no such error.

Again Lady Wydgate perceived that Mr. Beke recognized himself to be, as it were, in Coventry, or the neighbourhood of that renowned city. And she saw that he angrily resented it; and resenting it would not sue for peace. To tell the truth it struck her that for a worthy object Mr. Beke would not be averse from war. And what object worthier than the vindication of his own independence?

But Mr. Beke would make no faintest show of apologizing, so to speak, for his recent company. Even at Eresby he would choose for himself.

She was probably fully aware that he had not really chosen it at all, but that it had

chosen him. Therefore the fact that Osric suggested no hint of such an excuse for himself pleased her. He was quite a man, and Lady Wydgate liked a man.

"As a matter of fact," she said presently, "we heard that you had a guide, so we did not feel anxious as to your being lost."

That Mr. Tommy Langlip, whom Mrs. Freke declared to be the biggest gossip in Rentshire, had overtaken the brougham just as Miss Van Arnhem and Dr. Hart were turning into the park, and while they were waiting for the lodge-keeper to open the gates.

"Good-evening, Miss Van Arnhem," he had called out, after peering inquisitively into the carriage. "'Evenin', doctor. Glad to see you going that way. Otherwise it might look like an elopement."

"We did start," called Judith, "but Dr. Hart thought the weather threatening, and said we'd better go home, and elope another day."

"Your good-lookin' cousin," shouted Mr. Tommy Langlip—he never believed any one could hear unless he yelled at them—"is off with the Freke; they've got a third horse for the parson. I left 'em waiting about for him."

"They'd want Sir Francis Jeune 'fore they'd want the parson," chuckled Dr. Hart, who had a dolorous habit of pleasantry on occasion.

And that was how they knew at Eresby that Mr. Beke was with Mrs. Freke, and why some of them specially resented his being late. But of all this nothing ever reached his own ears. Nevertheless he was aware that they had known.

It was rather a dull dinner, Mr. Beke thought, and he was not sorry when it was over and the ladies had filed away. The men gave no suggestion of annoyance—in fact Sir Paul de Visors was in an unusually benignant temper. He had had a much better day out than he had expected, and the evening post had brought him payment of a certain debt of honour that he had feared would be a debt merely honorary.

When they went into the drawing-room Miss Van Arnhem was not there.

"I have sent her to bed," explained Lady Wydgate to her husband and his nephew. The other two men had joined Miss Hartington and the Cabinet Minister's wife. The Cabinet Minister himself had gone to the library to write a letter.

"We are discussing *Lady John*," Osric heard Miss Hartington saying.

The latest novel, very yellow outside and of an archaic shape, as if to atone for its *fin de siècle* interior, lay agape on her lap.

"I do wish," said the Cabinet Minister's

wife, "that authors could content themselves with fewer swells. There's not a commoner in the book."

"No," put in Sir Paul. "And even a baronet the author calls a 'nobleman.'"

"That," murmurs Gerry obsequiously, "if she had known you, would seem a very trifling inaccuracy."

"How do you know it's a she?" demanded Miss Hartington.

"Because it professes to be the product of James Alexander Raiks. If it was really by a man he'd curry favour and call himself Alicia de Something."

Mr. Beke's opinion of *Lady John* was not asked. True he was some way off and engaged in another conversation, but he had read the book, and had a good deal to say about it. It was, therefore, a little tiresome not to have the opportunity.

CHAPTER XXI

THOUGH, as Lord Wydgate had hinted, many persons might take Mr. O'Rorke for a buffoon, he was not much given to blunder. Still, he was young yet and did so at intervals—intervals that widened annually. And he did so to-night: out of good nature, which oftener makes people blunder than may be commonly supposed.

He and Mr. Beke were passing along the corridor in which both their rooms were, on their way to bed.

"Ripping run that last to-day, wasn't it?" he observed.

Mr. Beke agreed that it was.

"But one was a thundering way off home at the finish," pursued Gerry. "We missed you and Judy, somehow. Rather a pity as it turned out, for you and she were soon parted. We could have cheered your solitude."

"My solitude didn't last long. Mrs. Freke overtook me."

"Ah," remarked Gerry. "Very good sort, I expect. But they can't stand her here."

In another corridor Miss Van Arnhem lay reading herself to sleep.

". . . Perhaps," she said to herself dismally, "he is not a bit nicer than his brother after all."

In his own room, Osric sat down by the fire and made himself comfortable with great deliberation and circumstance. This special care is partly *en revanche* for the discomfort and haste of his dressing for dinner. That disagreeable hurry had been to Mr. Beke almost a hardship. For the coming home to a pleasant fire in one's bedroom, to bath and leisurely preparation for dinner, with perhaps a little desultory glancing at a book or paper during the process, seemed always to him to supply the finish and complement to a day's hunting.

As he now read he frequently paused, and half closing the book, attended to his own thoughts.

He was conscious that his visit to Eresby had received its first check. And to a man like Mr. Beke it was scarcely any consolation to feel that the check had not been due to his own fault: for it was unlikely that he would ever admit the probability of his doing anything to deserve a check.

With two people here at all events he was less *persona gratissima* than he was yesterday:

so he told himself. And he was certainly annoyed with them because he thought so.

It was due to his real manliness that he did not in turn fall into the injustice of blaming Mrs. Freke. Nor did he dislike her more: if anything he disliked her less.

When he saw her at the meet he had carefully avoided any renewal of their slight acquaintance. And when she overtook him on the way home he had been bored, almost irritated. Her choosing to shelter in the tower of Clouds had annoyed him, because he had remembered her family connection with the heroine of its ugly tradition: and he had been much more irritated by her protestation of having seen the murdered woman's ghost. All these counts he had against her, as well as the main charge of having been, as she doubtless had, the cause of his lateness.

Nevertheless he did not dislike her quite so much as at first. He had caught glimpses, behind the dabbled paint and draggled hair, of a real woman; of something genuine. Not of what he thought a lady, perhaps, or of any feminine quality he admired, but still of some battered reality.

Again his thoughts came back to the same point: that the success of his visit—not, to Mr. Beke, a common visit at all—had had a check.

He remembered the part of his day that immediately preceded the undesired arrival of Mrs. Freke. Certainly Judith and he had just then moved much nearer to intimacy. A certain hardness that he was only half conscious of in himself had seemed to him rather a blemish in Miss Van Arnhem, and, while she had talked of her childhood and her dead brother, it had melted away—as if it was not to return.

Now, Mr. Beke had no plans concerning her. He had no intention of falling in love with her, or even of trying to: no intention of asking her to marry him without that preliminary. She was, he knew, an heiress; and he considered her too rich for him. Of course he had no prejudice against wealth; his prejudices were all against poverty. Nor, if he ever married, would he so marry as to become poorer. But, though it seemed to him quite possible that a man in his position should marry a wife to some small extent wealthier than himself, he could not imagine himself, with a few hundreds a year, thinking of marriage with a girl whose income was counted by thousands.

But, once or twice, he had certainly regretted that Miss Van Arnhem had so much. Seven thousand a year was out of the question. Had it been seven hundred he would have been pleased.

Everybody at Eresby did not think worse of Mr. Beke. Sir Paul de Visors had not taken a fancy to him at first. Partly because he suspected that Osric was extremely clever; and Sir Paul misdoubted clever folks. It was, he secretly thought, rather second-rate to be out-of-the-way clever.

But he began to think he had done Beke an injustice. It was not at all a clever thing to annoy the two young women in the house where he was actually staying, two young women of wealth and standing, whom he had been definitely invited to meet ("entered for," as it seemed to de Visors), "and all for the sake of a grass widow, whom every one barred; with no looks, and not up to sample in any way."

Sir Paul began to suspect that there might be a good deal of redeeming silliness in Mr. Beke.

He unquestioningly believed that Osric had leapt into a willing and energetic flirtation.

Gerry O'Rorke was not at all of that opinion, but then Sir Paul de Visors considered that Gerry O'Rorke was daft—or tuppence short of his change, as he put it.

CHAPTER XXII

Before getting into bed Mr. Beke had a look at the night. The pascal moon rode high and cold in a wild sky of drifting cloud, and the park lay deathly white under a thin pall of snow.

But marvellous are the capabilities, incalculable the surprises, of our climate: in the morning the winter seemed to have slunk away in the night. The sun shone cheerily in a blue and cloudless sky; the wind had gone to warm itself in the south, and breathed back a gentle promise of spring. The birds in every thicket were fussily telling each other that the sulky old laggard winter had gone at last.

Breakfast at Eresby was not unduly early, and the best train of the day to London left Weldon soon after eight; so no one was surprised that Sir Paul de Visors and the Cabinet Minister and his wife were not to be seen when the others appeared. The Cabinet Minister, it was known, had to return to London, where, it was understood, the affairs of the Duchy of

Kent required his attention. Sir Paul was not in the Cabinet, but he had to go to London to give evidence in a ridiculous lawsuit about a right of way. Unlike the Cabinet Minister, he was to return.

Miss Van Arnhem and Miss Hartington appeared together, and Mr. Beke perceived at once that any suggestion of winter had disappeared, just as it had from the weather.

Judith limped scarcely at all, and declared that she only did that much to excite pity, and until she heard what the plans for the day were.

"If they should be anything very boring," she explained, "one can always have a slight relapse, you know."

"*My* plan," said Miss Hartington, "is to invite you all over to luncheon. They write asking me sixty questions, and so I have told the groom to ride back and tell them to get luncheon for the six of us. That will save me writing any reply at all."

This invitation was accepted, almost joyfully. The Cabinet Minister and his wife had not contributed noticeably to the liveliness of the party, and Sir Paul was rather heavy too; but any sign of dismemberment is apt to demoralize a country-house party, especially if it is a very small one.

They all drove: Gerry in the landau with Lord and Lady Wydgate and Miss Hartington; Mr. Beke drove Miss Van Arnhem in a dog-cart.

"Last night belonged to January," observed Judith; "this morning belongs to May."

"There was certainly a very frosty feel about last night," remarked Osric.

She glanced sharply at him, but his steady face was impenetrable.

"You mean outside," she supposed. "Surely you did not find it cold *indoors!*"

"I must have had a slight chill," he answered, still impenetrably.

He glanced round, and noted how beautiful Eresby looked to-day. Judith returned to the charge in another direction.

"Don't you think we're a very good-tempered lot at Eresby?" she inquired.

"The whole party, or just the family?"

"Oh, which you like."

He chose, manlike, that which involved less labour in reply.

"My uncle and aunt are, I should say, exceedingly sweet-tempered."

"And about me?"

He turned and looked at her meditatively.

"Good enough tempered," he replied, "but

a bit uncertain. Peppery—and unreasonable."

She did not enjoy his criticism so much as she had intended.

"I'm not at all *sulky*," she remarked, rather hotly.

"Very likely not. I said peppery and unreasonable."

"Oh, I heard you."

He laughed.

"Evidently. Let's talk of something else."

But she wanted to get out of that particular subject with more of the honours of war.

"And how about yourself?" she demanded as it were inexorably.

"My temper? Oh, excellent when nothing tries it, bad enough when anything does."

"And *you* talk of *mine!*"

He mutely called upon the oaks and sky, the dappled deer and circumambient air to witness the inconsequence of woman. Assuredly he had not wanted to discuss the question of her temper, which did not at all specially interest him.

It takes three-quarters of an hour to drive to Weldon Paddocks: they got there just in time for luncheon. It is a large house, of Jacobean style, in rather a small park.

It betrays in an odd way that it is the

property of a poverty-stricken or spendthrift owner let to a careful and wealthy tenant. All such things as must be the concern of the owner witness to a slipshod penury: wherever the hand of plenty and conscientious attention shows it is the comfortable large hand of Miss Hartington.

Mr. Beke noted these signs keenly, and assigned each correctly.

"It is a pity, for the sake of the place, that she does not buy it," remarked Judith. "We are always trying to persuade her to do it."

Miss Hartington overheard and turned round.

"He won't agree with you," she said. "Mr. Beke would think it better that the roof fell in on my poor head, and it were still Lord Verdun's, than that he should sell it to me and I should have a new roof."

Mr. Beke laughed and defended himself.

"No," he replied. "The Verduns only bought it forty or fifty years ago. It's not a Verdun property really. They have my full permission to sell it."

"And where," demanded their young hostess, "were the Hartingtons forty or fifty years ago?"

No one can tell her, but Lord Wydgate says gracefully—

"What matters much more to us is where they will be forty or fifty years to come. And we, who are neighbours, hope it will be here."

At luncheon Miss Hartington had Lord and Lady Wydgate on her right and left, next Lord Wydgate came Judith: next her mother Mr. Beke: so Gerry O'Rorke had the foot of the table opposite their hostess.

Five out of the six think he looks very comfortable there: perhaps the sixth also.

After luncheon the ladies strolled off to look at the spring flowers in Miss Hartington's winter garden. Mr. O'Rorke *faisait les honneurs:* he gets cigarettes and knows where to find the matches.

"How well you look there," observed Lord Wydgate, smiling quietly.

"Where?" inquired Gerry innocently.

"At the end of the table opposite Miss Hartington."

He almost blushed. He had, he declared, long been learning to blush at will, but had not yet attained much proficiency.

The evidences of its occupant's wealth were everywhere at Weldon Paddocks. But more obvious were the evidences of her taste. The drawing-rooms were full of beautiful and interesting things: pictures, china, books, miniatures,

furniture—English, French and Italian, Dutch and Spanish.

Mr. Beke noted that there was everywhere a certain subtle scent that goes with rooms in which such things are. He called it the scent of a house where people have been gentlemen and ladies for a long while.

"It's all very depressing," remarked Gerry. The cigarettes were finished, and the three gentlemen had joined the three ladies in a pale primrose-coloured room called the Saloon. This room opened by a draped arch out of the drawing-room. In the latter the four others were admiring Miss Hartington's possessions. Mr. O'Rorke and that lady were, for the moment, *tête-à-tête.*

"Depressing!"

"Yes," persisted the youthful diplomat; "that's what I find it."

"I have tried," declared the lady innocently, "to make it all so cheerful."

Gerry shook his head dolorously.

"It depresses *me*," he insisted.

And, as Miss Hartington did not press for his reasons it is possible that she had some theory of her own concerning them.

"One can easily see," she said serenely, "that you are of a morbid and easily depressed character."

He moved towards the other room. His cheery Irish eyes met hers and they laughed.

"*You* don't depress me," he remarked, "not out in the open. But all these things"—with an irritated glance at the *luxe* around—"they do. They are ticketed 'Hands off.'"

"Does that weigh on your spirit? Do you want to take them?"

"Devil a one of the lot. But—bad cess to them; they warn a fellow of the price of their owner."

"Their owner," said Miss Hartington, moving nearer to the drawing-room, "is *priceless*."

CHAPTER XXIII

"FREDA," demanded Miss Van Arnhem half-an-hour later, "was Gerry proposing to you in the saloon after luncheon?"

They were examining the stables, a great feature in a Rentshire country house, and the two girls were a bit apart from the young men; Lord and Lady Wydgate were resting indoors.

"Well," replied her friend, ingenuously, "I don't know."

Judith laughed.

"I think," returned Miss Hartington, after a pause, "he was trying not to."

"In that case," says Judith sapiently, "one of these days he will try again."

"That," observed Freda, "depends."

"On what?"

"On me."

They both laughed gently once more.

"I like him—ever so much," remarked Miss Hartington.

"So do I," observed Miss Van Arnhem.

Her friend glanced at her sharply.

"Oh, not at all in that way," added Judith. "I think I like him too much for that."

"I used to think," said Miss Hartington, "that he wanted to marry *you*."

"And you have changed your mind?"

Though Judith is quite certain that she neither intends nor wants to marry Gerry O'Rorke her tone is almost disappointed. She does, in fact, hope that Freda will herself marry him. She likes her, and she likes him, and they would be delightful neighbours. And it would, of course, be a very good thing for him. Nevertheless she does not altogether rejoice at hearing that he has no thought of herself at all.

"Yes," replied Freda stoutly; "I have changed my mind, because—well, because I have arrived at the belief that he would like to marry me."

Whether she would like to marry him she does not say; and Judith prudently abstains from asking her. She had plainly gathered that, in the mind of Miss Hartington, Gerry O'Rorke was still restrained from committing himself to become her lover by the recollection of her wealth.

Miss Van Arnhem did not herself, however, attach quite so much weight to this delicacy of Gerry's as her friend evidently did. But she

did not say so. If they were to be married why should they not think a little exaggeratedly of each other's virtues?

But whether the wealth of Miss Hartington gave Mr. O'Rorke pause or no, Judith believed that her own would always prevent Mr. Beke from any thought of herself.

Judith was not nearly so rich as Freda, but she had an estate worth nearly seven thousand a year, and it lay in Rentshire. Her father, Lord Derek Van Arnhem, was the only son of the eighth Duke of Ipswich by his second wife, and that Duchess of Ipswich was heiress of Houghton. Lady Derek Van Arnhem at Houghton and Lord Wydgate at Eresby were neighbours, and so it had come about that Osric's uncle had married the widow. For many years Houghton had been let to the Master of the East Rentshire.

Of all these facts Osric was fully informed. He had a natural aptitude for understanding and remembering them. And, though he was not taken over to Houghton, or reminded by any allusion of its existence, he knew all about it.

On the way home Judith took Mr. Beke to call on an old maid called Miss Rokesby.

"She is very clever, and very aristocratic, and very poor," explained Miss Van Arnhem.

Mr. Beke sighed.

"Sounds a dismal mixture," he suggested.

"Well, not exactly dismal, but rather sad. Pathetic, I think, would be about the best word. Her brother was rector of Lowton—where we met yesterday. It's a very big living—as regards money, I mean; there is very little work. And it's about the only thing saleable that Lord Verdun didn't sell. He gave it to his nephew, but after three years he broke his neck out hunting. And Miss Rokesby has about sixpence a year to live on."

Miss Rokesby lived in a very tiny cottage, like a wren's nest, which was full of pathetic refinements. She herself was elderly, but still pretty, and her manners raised the thatched cottage from a woodman's hut to a sort of sad little Trianon.

In her drawing-room they found Miss Tab Peel and her bulgey-eyed King Charles spaniel —Snip. And, very soon after their own arrival, Mr. Prance and Mrs. Freke were announced.

Miss Rokesby had most right to be annoyed. She was often three weeks without a visitor, and now three sets arrived at once.

But Miss Van Arnhem was also provoked. She had just forgotten Mrs. Freke, and it was tiresome to be reminded of her again.

Nevertheless she was gracious enough. Her

dislike of the daughter did not prevent her rather liking the harmless old father. And she knew that Mrs. Freke was less loud and objectionable when her father was with her.

Still, their advent hurried Miss Van Arnhem's departure. It made no difference to Candied Peel. Once seated in any one else's arm-chair no earthly force could move her under two hours.

"I like to give the devil his due," remarked Judith, as Mr. Beke drove her home along the Rentshire lanes.

"Which devil?"

"Well, Mrs. Freke. Did you notice those almond biscuits? They looked very expensive —I dare say they were the remains of a present. And there were only four of them—and six people. Didn't you see Mrs. Freke just going to take one? Then she counted heads—only no one saw her but I—and took bread-and-butter."

"She probably prefers bread-and-butter; so do I," observed Osric.

"Oh, nonsense!" persisted Judith, not always just, but sometimes fiercely generous. "She did it out of niceness — because dear Miss Rokesby is so poor and would mind so much. *We* shouldn't mind a bit if the tea-cake would not go round. And then that horrid old

Candied Peel grabbed *two* of them—one for herself, and one for that gurgling Snip of hers."

"He *is* mangy," admited Osric.

"Gerry calls him '*Myrrh, Aloes and Cassia,*'" says Judith. "I can't think why."

"Nor can I," asserted Mr. Beke.

"Well," declared Judith, "I do think it was nice of Mrs. Freke. That fancy biscuit will be saved up in the Book of Life."

"The one Snip ate?"

For once Judith's generosity was also just. Mrs. Freke might think nothing of taking away another woman's only husband, but she could not devour one of her four fancy biscuits.

CHAPTER XXIV

A YEAR and a half after Mr. Beke's first visit to Eresby his regiment went out to India; and he went with it.

There had in the meantime been half-a-dozen other visits to his uncle; the second only a couple of months after the first. For Sir Lionel Beke took his wife and daughters to Paris at the end of May; so Osric was bidden to spend his Whitsuntide at Eresby.

In September he went there to shoot partridges, in November to shoot pheasants, and at Christmas the whole family went there—that is, his parents and his two sisters also went. His elder brother was at Cannes, his younger away at sea. Since his marriage Lionel Beke had remained much abroad, as will be mentioned again presently.

Besides a second earlier visit, and a second Whitsuntide visit, Osric went to Eresby in the late September of that year, 1895, to say farewell before the departure of his regiment for India.

He had long ago, of course, ceased to be the junior subaltern. And his position in his own family was also modified.

His elder brother wrote home very seldom, and the elder brother's wife was an irregular correspondent also. But rumours crept home to Sir Lionel Beke concerning his eldest son's health, that more and more disquieted him. There had been an accident, duly mentioned in one of the infrequent letters, which did not sound very alarming as reported, and was not dwelt upon as of any importance. But Lionel Beke and Mrs. Lionel remained abroad, and slowly there travelled to the house in Eaton Place whispers that the young man's health was seriously impaired.

To Eresby also these rumours had found their way, but less vaguely, with less reticence of detail.

"I suppose," remarked Lord Wydgate, "it is useless to try and dissuade you from accompanying your regiment to India?"

This, of course, he said to Osric.

They were sitting in Lord Wydgate's study, and Osric was smoking a cigarette. The ladies had gone to bed, and no other man was staying at Eresby. On the following day the young man was leaving.

"I have no doubt at all that I ought to go,"

he answered decidedly. "Of course for most reasons one would rather stop at home. But these little drawbacks of soldiering one understands must come."

"I do not know," observed his uncle, "how far your father is aware of the breakdown in Lionel's health?"

"He knows that there is some cause for anxiety. We all hope that is the worst that can be said."

Lord Wydgate shook his head.

A small wood fire burnt on the hearth; he felt the least chill. He looked into it, And so did Osric. Two men, such as they are, find it difficult to speak of that which is in their minds.

Osric knew that his uncle considered Lionel's illness to be such as to seriously modify the second brother's position. And he himself believed that Lord Wydgate was right. He knew more of his brother's former manner of life than his uncle, and was aware that those past follies must very seriously affect the chances of recovery.

"I have heard no talk of any heir there," remarked Lord Wydgate.

"There is none."

The old man looked into the fire again. It was hard not to be able to say how much he

would like the young man at his side to be his own heir; but to say any such thing between those two would be impossible.

"Well," he said, "it is all in God's hands. We cannot tell how it will be."

"No," replied his nephew, "and, though Lionel's health is in a state that must make my poor father sad and anxious, it is by no means hopeless."

"If he should be given back to life and health," said Lord Wydgate, "perhaps this will have taught him some useful lessons."

"He may have been wild—a bit," said Osric, "but he's not bad. He has never done any one in the world an injury."

The old man felt that he was being gently reproved by the young one. But he was far from resenting it.

"Osric," he said, laying his thin white hand on the strong hand of his nephew, "I make no doubt you are right to go. I think you would always do what is the right thing. But—oh, I wish you could stay."

The young soldier did not draw away his hand; but it almost embarrassed him. His nature was cold, and he could not be anything but himself.

"I seem to have found a dear son in my old age," said his uncle, "only in time to lose him."

The words and tone were tender, almost wistful. Osric knew how true they were. He had known for a long time that between him and his uncle was an affection almost special, because more sympathetic than that between him and his own father. Sir Lionel had always preferred his eldest son.

But it is much easier for the old to translate their heart into speech than for the young. Osric could say nothing to the point.

"Indeed," he answered lamely, "you are very good to me."

Lord Wydgate expected nothing more. The old, when they are wise, are content with very little from the young.

"As you are going," continued his uncle, "I had better tell you what otherwise might have waited. You know that, recognizing Lionel's position as my ultimate heir, I have made him such an allowance as befits his prospect."

Osric nodded, and still looked into the fire.

"Out of Eresby I can leave you nothing," the old man went on, "but out of my own savings I shall leave you twenty-five thousand pounds, in any case."

He had taken his hand away, and he held it out towards the flickering logs.

"In the meantime, and from now, I would like you to have the interest of it," he concluded.

His nephew said some words of thanks, rather awkwardly. There was a brief pause.

"You may want to marry," continued Lord Wydgate, trying not to watch the young man's face.

But Osric shook his head.

"I half hoped—we both hoped," the old man said, "that you might have married, and settled near us at Houghton," he concluded, with a sort of grave frankness.

But the young soldier shook his head again. He rose, and, standing with straight back, leant against the mantelpiece, looked down into the old man's face.

"Uncle Osric," he said simply, "if you had been your father's brother's younger son could you have asked Aunt Judith to marry you?"

"I am sure," replied Lord Wydgate, smiling, "that she would have been just as willing."

"But could you have asked her?"

Lord Wydgate could not say that he would. Osric turned round and looked again into the fire. And presently they went to bed.

Next day Mr. Beke departed. As he drove through the park he thought of the first time, eighteen months ago, that he saw those oaks, and at the turning he looked back towards the house. Its image lay sleeping in the placid lake. On the terrace his uncle, Lady Wydgate,

and Judith were still standing, waving him farewells.

It was all so much more to him now than it was then—a year and a half ago. And it was very hard not to wonder whether in truth it would one day be all his own.

At the lodge the lodge-keeper came out and curtsied her adieux.

"Good-bye, Mr. Osric," she called out, "and good luck, sir. Come safe home again soon; his lordship 'll miss you sadly."

On the way to the station he received many salutes—not to the carriage now, but to himself. He was well known as my lord's nephew and favourite.

And East Rentshire had long ago decided that he and Judith should make a match of it, even if the elder brother should get well, and he should never be Lord Wydgate.

CHAPTER XXV

THE Black Northumberland Borderers arrived at Bombay on the twenty-eighth of October, and proceeded forthwith to Poona, which they found looking very green and beautiful.

Nevertheless, Mr. Beke did not care for it. He was not the sort of English officer who finds a smart Indian station entirely delightful. A smart military society was not much to his taste, and Poona is nothing if it is not smart and military.

The social splendours of the Bund Gardens did not either dazzle or delight him. Of course the crowd was gay; but he silently condemned it as 'tinny." The ladies were undoubtedly resplendent, and their manners were highly contemporaneous—"up to date" would be their own rendering of it. But, like Melchizedek, King of Salem, they are without father, without mother, without descent. They are putatively children of the great world, but the real great world is quite in the dark about them. In

India they are English: Mem sahibs. But what are they at home? Once in England they cannot be localized or traced—except by their clothes.

And they are tiring, like the flashing of over-brilliant colours in an over-dazzling light—like the din of untempered brazen bells jangled too energetically. Noise and colour are both hard, assertive, almost vulgar. Mr. Beke is not liked by them: a fact which he appreciates, and for which he is rather grateful to them. Some say he is dull, others that he is haughty. Only they put it vernacularly.

"Beke?" says Mrs. D. A. A. G. B. "Chap with all the side on. Oh! No use at all for *him*."

"That? Lord, don't you know? That's Beke of the Blacks—poopstick! Rather."

And so Mrs. A. D. C. dismisses him.

He is glad enough to be dismissed. He was much more glad when he found himself sent on detachment to Katara. Katara is an up-country station, in the highlands of the Deccan: as one goeth by the Southern Mahratta Railway to Belgaum, only its cantonments are thirteen miles from the little railway station.

It is not unpopular, and Mr. Beke had heard it well enough spoken of. There is, he understands, a native regiment there, and

a company of artillery; and there are various civil representatives of the Supreme Government.

The detachment of the Blacks consisted of two companies: Captain Orde's and Captain Rooke's. Mr. Beke liked his own "skipper," and he liked all the subalterns who were going —of whom Bertie Fane was one.

He was delighted to get away from Poona; and he rather enjoyed the eighty miles of journey, not too madly rapid, that bring one to the old Mahratta Hill station.

Poona, he had been repeatedly told, sits two thousand feet higher above the sea than Bombay: and he is now informed that Katara is two thousand feet higher up than Poona; very likely one of those traditional misinformations that cling about every neighbourhood.

Anyway, Katara felt as much fresher than Poona as Poona feels less muggy than Bombay.

As they marched from the station he noticed that the coolies working in the paddy-fields were much darker than the natives at Poona. These men were, in fact, almost black: little, wiry, ugly men, energetic and observant.

They had scarcely got to their lines before a red-faced man, in a veranda-made durzi suit, drove himself up in a Ralli car, and, throwing

the reins to the syce, jumped out and ran up the steps into the detachment mess.

"Is this for you?" he inquired, making straight for Osric and holding out a note addressed in a colossal hand to *O. Beke, Esq., B.N.F.* "My wife sent me up to insist on your coming to dinner to-night—I'm Major Freke, of the other regiment."

By the 'other regiment' Mr. Bede knew that the 199th Bombay Pioneers was modestly indicated—one of the smartest of native corps.

Mr. Beke was never a man to be pleased, or even willing to be carried by assault; and he did not find the dissipated-looking Major's appearance at all attractive. As for Mrs. Freke, he remembered her well enough: he remembered that she was not his sort of lady at all. He also recollected that she had sent him a Christmas Card a year ago, which smelled very strongly of eau-de-Chypre, whose receipt he had never acknowledged. But he thought it rather friendly of these people to want to feed him: and he had in the mean season seen several ladies so much worse than Mrs. Freke that by comparison she seemed not extraordinarily unpleasant.

"A first night in a new station is always frightfully uncomfortable," urged Major Freke. He was watching Mr. Beke more observantly

than that officer imagined. To tell the truth, Osric was not, as the gallant Major told himself, "Syb's ordinary form."

"And what," he meditates, "is her game now?"

"Your regiment," Mr. Beke replied, "has kindly invited us all for to-night. We were all going."

"Oh, *that's* all right, I've told Carstairs (our mess president) that *you* wouldn't dine there."

This very nearly causes Osric to refuse flatly; but, thus cornered, he scarcely sees his way out of accepting without rudeness. He accepts, inwardly resolving that such acceptances shall be infrequent.

Major Freke has to be charged with his verbal reply: there are no writing things yet unpacked.

It is not difficult to find one's way about at Katara, even if one is, like Mr. Beke, a fresh arrival. There is only one road, which, though it twists in and out a bit, has no ramifications. And the candid Indian custom of hoisting one's name and credentials on a painted board at the gate further simplified the task of finding the Major Sahib's bungalow.

Still it is dark, or as dark as it intends to be, as Beke walks across the Maidan and

counts for the third bungalow from the end of the sepoy lines.

In the dusky shadows of the hibiscus-trees the fireflies are beginning to weave their rhythmic dances; the smell of the night leans down to kiss the smell of the warm earth, and in a pale ocean of grey sky, without any islet or reef of cloud, swims the tropic moon.

The young man's thoughts fly homeward with a kind of gasp. He is, one would say, singularly unsentimental; but that one hungry sentiment of exile almost sickens him—as they sicken who are starved and empty.

What does he care for all this great Hind? He is intelligent and he has read, and goes on reading, much of its history. He is not uninterested. He can admire. Its prodigal beauty is not lost on him, but it is wasted. He sees, but he does not value. He would give all Hindustan for one homely English county. He will never make his home here, as thousands of his countrymen and women have done.

He looks up into the sky where the moon rides, so queenly as almost to swamp the radiance of her little courtier stars.

And such stars as there are are strangers. But the moon is familiar. She at least is the

same as he has always known; she looks partly the same as when she had lit him home, belated, through English lanes after a long day's hunting, ending far from home. Even now, to-night, she will throw down her chilly light at home on English lanes and fields, and light home other tired hunters.

"Star-gazing, Mr. Beke?"

And out of the black shadow of a gap in the cactus hedge a white figure moves towards him. They meet, and he greets her.

"I saw you coming," she says, "over the maidan. And I came out to watch you. You looked so ridiculously familiar: so English, *so Rentshire*——" She breaks off shortly.

"Dear me!" she cried, beginning again, "the sight of you somehow made me feel so deadly homesick all of a sudden."

If Mrs. Freke had been a very clever woman, which she may or may not have been, she could not have made a much better beginning.

"As it happened," he answered, "I was feeling rather that way myself."

He gives a little laugh at himself. She looks up at him curiously. He seems very tall in the moonlight.

"So you *have* some feelings?" she says, surprised.

"Any number! I feel bored, and seedy, and ill-tempered, and all sorts of things."

"I didn't think," she persists, heedless of his gibing tone, "that you had a heart—somehow."

"I'm not deformed," he protests, laughing. "I've all the usual things."

She shakes her head impatiently: she had thought herself within measurable distance of a pretty interchange of sentiment with him.

CHAPTER XXVI

Mr. Beke had only been six weeks in India, and he had scarcely dined out at all, except in other messes or at the Club of Western India ; so that he was rather interested by the dinner at the Frekes' bungalow. It was definitely Anglo-Indian, and seemed to him traditional, as if it hailed from the piping times of John Company Bahádur Sahib. Major Freke had been in India twenty years, and he had been married for half-a-dozen. India was their home as Mr. Beke was resolved it never should be his.

The dinner itself was excellent, though entirely Indian ; the bungalow comfortable and pretty ; the waiting of the picturesque and numerous native servants imperceptible and faultless. Mr. Beke began to perceive with surprise that his hostess must be a good manager. During dinner Mrs. Freke did not talk at all about home or Rentshire, but stuck to India and the news of the world.

But afterwards, when Osric and she were

alone, she slid back to talk of England and the English county that they both knew.

As soon as dinner was over, they all three had coffee together in the dining-room. And the two men smoked. Mrs. Freke did not smoke because it made her sick, and also because it made her fringe smell; but she sat, chatting with them, till a few minutes before they made a move back to the drawing-room.

Very soon after her departure Major Freke led the way out on to the veranda, from which the drawing-room also opened. Mr. Beke took half-a-dozen paces along the veranda and came to the open windows of the drawing-room.

"Here I am!" called out Mrs. Freke from the piano. "Come in!"

He did so, and his hostess asked him if he could sing "Fires." He admitted that he could not, unfortunately, sing at all; but begged her to do so. She sang, not badly, an eminently contemporaneous ditty, which might mean a great deal too much, or might mean absolutely nothing at all. Mr. Beke politely decided that it was totally meaningless.

Long before she had finished her song he was aware that Major Freke was not following him into the drawing-room.

"Please don't try to turn over the pages while I sing, or watch me," she requested; "go

and sit down on the sofa where I can't see you."

He did what he was told indifferently.

As soon as she had sung the last word of the song she came across and sat down on the sofa also.

"I can't sing a bit," she said. "I've no more voice than a creaky hinge; but I love that song—it is so true."

"I never understand songs," replies Osric, prudently. "I never try to; it never occurred to me that one need."

He examined Mrs. Freke dispassionately. She certainly looks better by night than by day. And he perceives that she is much less objectionable when alone than when she has what she would herself inevitably call a gallery to play to.

"Weren't you surprised when Tubs" (Tubs is Major Freke, as Mr. Beke has already gathered), "brought you my note? You didn't know we were here, did you?"

Osric admits his ignorance and the lady continues—

"We only came here last month: from Jorki, that's four hundred miles from anywhere, in the Central Provinces. This is quite Simla-politan in comparison."

Mrs. Freke surveys Mr. Beke's long legs,

and wonders why there should be such inequality in legs: Tubby's are so unduly fat. But these speculations are not conducted aloud.

"It was very good of you to ask me," observed the young man, recurring to her penultimate remark.

She hopes (aloud this time), that he will come often: he scarcely commits himself to any undertaking that he will.

"One, two, three, four—this makes our fourth meeting," she says, counting on her fingers; and challenging his criticism of her hands and arms, against which there is, indeed, nothing to be said.

"The last time was in Miss Rokesby's little drawing-room," he says, thinking less of the woman by his side than of the other memories she has called up.

She nods her head complacently.

"Ah," she exclaims, "you don't forget!"

As a matter of fact forgetfulness is not Mr. Beke's weakness. His memory is definite and reliable—of benefit and injuries, as of trivialities.

"I remember," he observes, "as we were driving home, my cousin praising you for a little unselfishness. Do you remember Miss Tab Peel and the smart biscuits?"

Mrs. Freke starts forward impatiently.

"She must have been jolly well hard up for

something to praise in me, and jolly well determined to praise me for something," she declares scornfully.

"And is that objectionable?"

Mrs. Freke sniffs again.

"Objectionable! What geese men are—even the least stupid of you! When Miss Van Arnhem went out of her way to praise me for not being as greedy as old Tab Peel, any *woman* would know it was to salve her conscience for previous abuse."

Mr. Beke considered for a moment, and then said coldly—

"As a matter of fact, I do not think Miss Van Arnhem has ever mentioned your name to me."

It was, he felt sure, Miss Hartington who had criticized her to him.

Mrs. Freke looked at him sharply. A woman who tells many fibs is not given to believe all that she is told. But Mr. Beke's manner was apt to be convincing.

"The stupidity of men," she retorted, woman-like, starting a fresh hare, "is surpassed only by their vanity. *You're* not the only man in the world: I never said it was to *you* she had abused me."

She leant back again among her cushions, becoming conscious that the unshaded light of the lamp fell upon her face as she bent

forward; but not before it had revealed her adventitious complexion, and the lines about her eyes.

She can see his face better now. And some expression on it causes her to change her tone, and, as soon as may be, her topic also.

Mr. Beke wonders where his host is, and resents his absence. "Oh," she says, reading his thoughts, which sometimes are legible enough, "Tubby has his own fish to fry. Standards, fortunately, vary; and Mrs. Penruddocke admires the 'Major' vastly."

The expression of her guest's face does not perceptibly lighten, though it alters.

Poor Mrs. Freke is fain to try again.

"He is a very good old thing," she says, not alluding to Mr. Beke, "and we understand each other, which is everything. I am not jealous, and so he goes his little way cheerfully; and I have not got him always under my feet."

Mr. Beke asks her to sing something else, and she agrees, rather needlessly flattered. He wants to look at his watch, and he does so while she is *en route* for the piano with her back to him. It is not nearly so late as he had hoped. He also gets up, and does not return to the sofa, but starts a chair of his own which there can be no question of sharing.

She sings "Home, Sweet Home," and he is

conscious of a vague irritation against her for her choice. But it serves, as she intended, to bring them by uncontentious paths, to the one subject they have in common.

When it is over she comes back to her sofa, and notes his change of venue. She asks him about many familiar figures of the L.L. and East Rentshire: understanding that his local knowledge is much wider than at the time of his first visit when she had met him. And she speaks of those two days when she and he were both out with the East Rentshire and the L.L.—the day of the meet at Bardon Cross and the famous Gossy Hill day of the L.L.'s meet at Lowton Green.

She sends his thoughts back to distant places, among distant and familiar names of people and of places; and it all seems very far away in time also now—as if he had then been very young. And so, as she has guessed it would, a sort of sheltering curtain falls over herself also; she is softened into a share of a memory, and the gentler light of association creeps about her.

At ten o'clock Major Freke returned; he had not, it appears, been basking in the smiles of Mrs. Penruddocke, but had been up to the mess to see if the strangers were being properly done by. Perhaps, also, for a glass or so of mess port. He brings with him a pale buff

warrior of the name, it would seem, of Juggins. He is really quite a senior subaltern, but he has the air of a second lieutenant of very recent importation. His eyes are of an absurd and conspicuous pale blue, his hair is buff, his cheeks are buff and pink, his legs are uncertain and wavy.

He adores Mrs. Freke, and conceives an abhorrence of Mr. Beke on the spot; nevertheless, he respects him abjectly because he believes that that gentleman has been flirting furiously with his Second-in-Command's wife for the last hour or so. Twenty minutes later, Mr. Beke takes his leave, and Juggins has a brief "innings," as he tells himself subsequently.

Mr. Beke goes home across the maidan, which lies deathly silent under the high moon. He can see the dial of his watch very plainly by her light: it is twenty-two minutes to eleven—about a quarter to six at home in Rentshire, he calculates; and this is Thursday—a day on which the L.L. are apt to meet a long way from Eresby, and the East Rentshire do not meet at all. So that very likely Judith is riding home still, and yonder moon is lighting her along the cold lane. . . .

He wonders who is with her. Perhaps Miss Hartington, and perhaps Gerry O'Rorke. . . . He can almost hear their cheery laughter

echoing out across the world: there is no sound at all here, save the hushed voices of the silence of the night.

He looks westward, by north, towards England, as he thinks, and resents the foolish obstacle of intervening space.

CHAPTER XXVII

Mr. Beke's first dinner at the Frekes' bungalow was not his last.

It was felt by the detachment that it behoved it to show responsive hospitality to the regiment which had received it on arrival so hospitably. So there was a good deal of asking back; and Mr. Beke invited Major Freke, and—*faute de mieux*—Juggins. It had not occurred to Mr. Beke that this would lay him open to a speedy retort of hospitality; but it did.

He excused himself—not a very easy thing to do at Katara, where every one knew if any one else had an extra person to dinner; but in the course of the week was caught by a *vivâ-voce* invitation, always difficult to evade, and often impossible. For that reason Mr. Beke resented them, and would never have taken such undue advantage himself. He was walking with Fane, when they encountered the Major, and he went as near as he dared to hinting that Fane and he had some engagement for the night

mentioned: he was afraid to hint too plainly lest his innocent friend should betray him.

"Oh, another night will do as well. Come Tuesday!" urged the Second-in-Command. "And will you come too, Fane?"

Fane was rather flattered, and always game to do anything with anybody, and accepted gratefully. Mr. Beke admitted that *Tuesday* was unoccupied, as if all the other days of the week were crowded with engagements; and he also accepted, but with less enthusiasm.

However, there was no question of a *tête-à-tête* this time. *Tête-à-têtes*, it must be said, became ultimately frequent enough, but not after dinner.

How do habits grow? Nothing is easier to trace, but nothing more tedious, than the steady gradual accumulation of a habit.

Of course Mr. Beke called for his *visite de digestion* after that first dinner. He called also after the written invitation he had refused; and he called again after that Tuesday on which he and Fane dined together at the Frekes'. Concerning such callings, Mr. Beke was strict and punctilious. On all three occasions he found Mrs. Freke at home; and on none of them did any other visitor arrive to interrupt their duet.

Possibly the lady had meditated, in the meanwhile, over her success and her failures with

this difficult young man. It is certain she made progress in learning to avoid repetition of the failures in learning to reproduce the success.

Her manner with Mr. Beke dropped its hardness and its loudness, losing thereby what had specially repelled him. She acquired a sort of gentleness that she kept for him only; there was something wistful in her manner: as though she knew herself to need improvement, as though *he* could somehow conjure the changes she desired, in her frank admission of what was all amiss. And yet she did not make love to him, much less raise signals of expecting such attentions from him.

Perhaps Mr. Beke had originally been too charitable in assuming that this lady was probably a mere fool. A decent man is apt to be over-charitable in his judgment of a woman; and especially if he easily attributes her foibles to simple folly.

Those three calls of Mr. Beke's were followed by others, at intervals of lessening distance. And he almost always found Mrs. Freke at home, whereas other people complained that she was so seldom to be caught.

"It is also *darwaza bund*," they grumbled; to the intense delight of the lady.

The truth was, Mrs. Freke was rather a great person at Katara. Her husband was Second-

in-Command of the regiment, and the Colonel was unmarried. He always declared, with great delicacy, that he awaited the demise of Major Freke, when he would espouse his relict. Now the 199th Bombay Pioneers holds up its head and esteems itself far above other staff-corps regiments; and Mrs. Freke was leading lady of it.

Mrs. Orde of the Detachment was scarcely a rival; Major Tompion of the Artillery had a wife, indeed, but she was frankly old, and thought only of her health and her husband's allowances. The Judge was a widower; the Collector had a sister who took excellent care that he should never become one.

There were sixteen married ladies at Katara, but they were none of them a match for Mrs. Freke. She was richer, smarter, more "on the spot," as she herself declared, than any of them. Old Mrs. Tompion secretly admired her, though the Collector's sister had nearly bitten her head off for saying the Second-in-Command's wife was *stylish*.

Now, it suits some people to be in power, while others are improved by the chills of opposition. And Mrs. Freke was much less aggressive at Katara, where her sway was acknowledged, than at home in Rentshire, where she perceived herself to be "barred."

The uses of adversity were not sweet to her; but the sun of prosperity mellowed her crudities.

Mr. Beke perceived these differences, and they had their weight. He perceived also that to him was accorded the distinction of being always welcomed sincerely by the social leader of Katara. Others were sometimes snubbed, sometimes encouraged. To some she would be to-day, "At Home;" to-morrow, *darwaza bund*; the day after, asleep. For it is certainly a further degree of refusal when "the Mem Sahib sleeps." But Osric was neither snubbed or encouraged; for him there was no shut door, for him the lady always was awake. And who is not flattered by a distinction?

He was conscious that he was really welcome, and there is nothing that is so likely to tempt a straightforward man to repeat his visits. At some other houses he felt that he arrived at the wrong moment: that he was *de trop*, and spoiling sport.

And he liked the bungalow: it was about the prettiest in the station. It was large and well appointed. It was *bien-montée*, and *bien-soignée:* never untidy or squalid. It had a cool, clean smell; it was always full of lovely flowers, and so was the large compound. The chairs were comfortable, the rooms full of good English

things, and not sicklied o'er with the rubbish of the bazaars.

Oddly enough, it never dawned on Mr. Beke that he was engaged in a flirtation: on the contrary, he imagined that he was elaborately keeping out of one. But Katara considered it was "a flirtation right enough," as Capt. the Hon. V. de Tracy remarked to Mr. Macbean, who shared his bungalow.

Capt. de Tracy was a Gunner; Mr. Macbean was Public Works. Mr. Macbean had had passages of his own with Mrs. Freke.

All the recognized landmarks of a flirtation were, as Mr. Macbean pointed out, conspicuously missing. They did not sit in each other's pockets at the race-course; between chuckers on polo days; nor at gymkhanas. He did not drive her in his tum-tum to Towli to take photographs, and subsequently develop them; nor even as far as the bridge when picnics were afoot in the hills towards Mahablehwar. He neither danced with her, nor sat out with her. Yet, as Capt. De Tracy asserted, "it was a flirtation right enough."

Only Mr. Beke never suspected it.

Mr. Fane did, and was rather puzzled in his simple little soul, remembering certain conversations he had had with his brother officer on such subjects. But Bertie Fane, though not other-

wise talented, had a brilliant capacity for minding his own business.

It is not proposed to detain the reader with a wearisome particularity as to the growth of that almost intimate acquaintance between Mr. Beke of the Blacks and Mrs. Freke "of the regiment," which such people as Mr. Macbean and Captain de Tracy declared was a flirtation.

But it may be said that, as the months crept on towards the breaking of the monsoon, they did not see less of each other. A taste they had in common was accidentally discovered by Mr. Beke, and may, at first, have rather surprised him. The lady, he found, was very fond of reading French, especially memoirs; and Mr. Beke, who had many such books to lend, became her librarian. In the choice of what he lent he took singular pains, having an antique scrupulosity as to what he would give a lady to read. But, in the long run, he lent a good deal, and the bringing of the books added many links to the chain of habit that Katara called his flirtation.

In the fullness of time Mr. Macbean went home to Scotland, on furlough, and in the house of his only smart relation he met Miss Van Arnhem, who discovered that he was from Katara, in the Deccan.

"I wonder," she inquired "if you have met

a sort of cousin of mine—Mr. Beke, of the Blacks."

"Ossy Beke," replied Mr. Macbean, of the Public Works. "Oh yes. Every one at Katara knows every one else—and especially Beke of the Blacks."

"I am afraid," said Miss Van Arnhem, "that he does not make a good Indian. He hates it all, and is ridiculously homesick."

"Oh!" declared the gentleman, "he's getting on. The exile has its consolations. There's a Freak of Art (not exactly a Freak of Nature, you know) who keeps him from being too homesick, I assure you."

Judith turned away, sick with herself for having heard even so much tale-bearing from a stranger, and yet not able to forget it.

Perhaps Mr. Macbean meant no harm; perhaps he was only bad form and could not help it. And perhaps he was malicious: one sort of man can be more spiteful than any woman. And Mr. Macbean had a grudge against Osric. For one thing, he believed that Mr. Beke of the Blacks had avoided his acquaintance, which he ascribed to conceit and to an impudent assumption of superiority on the soldier's part.

Mr. Beke was by no means universally popular outside his regiment. Some people at

Katara would have been overjoyed if they could have put him down as a "chap who could do nothing." But unfortunately he could do things rather specially well—especially shooting and polo. Mr. Macbean had also arrived at the suspicion that Miss Van Arnhem, who he knew to be a "swell," did not regard himself—Mr. Ian Macbean, of the Indian Public Works Department—as quite of her own class. Which was absurd, like some of those angles at the base of an isosceles triangle.

CHAPTER XXVIII

On the northern frontier of India, hundreds of leagues away from Katara, arose wars and rumours of wars: only the rumours came first and the wars very speedily after. Whereupon Mr. Beke bestirred himself rather unwontedly, and wrote letters, and made use of his influence, whereof he possessed a good deal, not only at home, but out there, where the Sovereign was the Queen-Empress. And seeing that in our British hearts, which seem unquarrelsome and not over-quixotic, there lurks ever a feeling that influential seniors cannot better prove their interest and affection for promising juniors than by sending them off, at their own instance, to be killed: seeing all this, it was not surprising that, one night, just as Mr. Beke was dressing for mess, there came news that he was accepted by the Supreme Government for service on the frontier.

A hard, quick step sounded on his veranda, and Captain Rooke, who commanded the detachment, stalked into his room.

"Lucky devil!" he observed succinctly. "You're accepted." Of course he knew, though no one else at Katara did, that Mr. Beke had volunteered.

He stood watching that officer while he very carefully finished tying his white tie: a process that demands for the moment the whole of any officer's attention. Captain Rooke watched the process anxiously—so many a tie goes wrong after an excellent beginning.

"Good business!" remarked Mr. Beke; but without saying whether he alluded to the success of his application or the success of his tie.

"Just like your beastly luck," observed his captain, employing the figure known as transferred epithet.

"You're to go at once," he continued; "the train leaves Katara station at 3 a.m., as you know."

Mr. Beke experienced a peculiar sensation of high spirits, quite novel and extremely interesting. He found himself ready to laugh on very small provocation, which was not his habit. He suddenly felt oddly youthful and light-hearted.

He finished dressing and went over to the mess, and was conscious of congratulations. Everybody wished they were in his shoes, every one secretly swore at his luck—the

wicked result of influence—but, when all is said and done, no one grudged him his chance: only they would like it too.

Bertie Fane was rather proud of him, in a personal sort of way. He had a measureless admiration for Beke, but there was now somehow a sort of joyful surprise; perhaps he might, if asked, have thought Osric would be too mechanical and unenthusiastic to volunteer for anything.

There are eight at mess, three of whom are guests, and they are all a little surprised, like Fane. Beke is so uncommonly genial, so cheery. He is often quaint, and, though not talkative in general, always rather worth listening to. But to-night he is in splendid form, and has lost any hint of stiffness. They find him a much nicer chap than they had realized.

As for himself, they all seem to him unreal: as though they were things of the past. He is not really talking to them, but to himself.

It seems suddenly to have occurred to him that there is such a thing as *life*, and he is just beginning to live it. What preceded seems leather and prunello: not real leather, or real prunello, but a silly copy.

Katara drops away into perspective, so does everything. Only the feverish chance in front seems present.

After mess he writes home. Of the fighting towards which he is making such haste he speaks as though it were a rather absurd joke. Of his own volunteering he writes as though the lust of honour, a soldier's keenness for the practice of his trade, any serious motive, had no existence: it is a ridiculous bidding for a "tin-plate" to break the monotony of his time, that is all. Thus goes the young British soldier forth to war, and Mr. Beke, unlike his fellows as he partly is, is not so strong as the tradition of his kind.

Who would take it from his letters to his mother or Lord Wydgate that this young man has coolly weighed all and counted all? That he, who is so keenly awake to the excellence of his inheritance, is fully awake also to the chances of what war brings?

He does not really promise himself immunity, though he seems to. But such things, somehow, men of his sort will not speak of. If he should fall, let it be without sentimental forecasting thereof.

His letter is cheerier than usual, of which he is slightly ashamed, for he knows that it will be a bitter letter to the reader; and also that extra cheerfulness is beneath him. He would like to be just as usual.

He orders several things from home, and

is very painstaking in making clear what he wants, and giving the clearest possible directions for their transit. He gets up to go and look out a price in the catalogue of the Army and Navy Stores. Having done so, he stops a moment at the sofa to exchange greetings with his dog. "Puzzle" is his name—a much-battered, broken-down rake of a dog with two ideas in life—fighting other dogs and adoration of Mr. Béke.

Mr. Beke is so well off that he has an excellent bungalow, and Bertie Fane is his guest in it. At this moment, however, Mr. Fane is sipping a peg in the ante-room of the mess, and talking war sapiently. Some of the frontier generals he approves, almost unreservedly ; others, he darkly hints, have all their glory in front of them. He sits upon the edge of a writing-table and wags one leg pendulously. With the other he prevents himself from tumbling off.

Mr. Beke sits down upon the sofa, and stoops down to kiss Puzzle's dissipated old head. Puzzle affects a manly indifference, and even boredom. He opens the least bitten ot his two eyelids, and promptly shuts it with a groan. There is a torn spot on that eye ; a black spot over the other, severed by a long scar. Mr. Beke lifts the old terrier up and

arranges him in a military but discomfortable attitude, and Puzzle groans again, blinking both eyes moodily. He adores his master, but considers him of a low order of intelligence.

"Well, Puzzle, have you packed?" demands Osric foolishly.

It is always a great consolation to Bertie Fane to behold how babyish Mr. Beke can be with Puzzle. Something in this question evidently upsets the dog; he slowly stiffens up his bristles, and changes his groan into a growl. Then, sudden and sharp, he barks.

There is a quick footstep on the veranda, and Mr. Beke turns to see who is coming. It is not at all like Fane's hard, rather heavy tread.

It is a woman's. In another moment she stands just inside the window, the night behind her, the pleasant, cheerful light of the room in front—Mrs. Freke.

With a chill astonishment, that assuredly is not welcome, the young man meets her. He thinks she has heard of his departure, and has had the folly to come to say good-bye. As a matter of fact, he had intended to leave a short note for her.

She is dressed in black, and she is pale. Her costume is a huge involvement of gauze and jet and lace—all black. And in her hair

blazes a crescent of good diamonds. Mr. Beke has seen them often before, but without much heeding them. He is a man who sees, but does not consider such things. He has no idea that they have a certain tragedy behind them; that the hand which first set them there lies, gripping a sword-handle, in a kudh of that very frontier whither he goes himself to-morrow.

The diamonds flash among hair that is much darker than it used to be—the incredible yellow and gold has deepened into an inoffensive, ruddy brown. Surely a man should feel flattered when a woman modifies the very colour of her hair in deference to what she takes to be his opinion. And the hair is more simple in its arrangement, less aggressive in its quantity. And to-night, as often lately, there is no paint upon the pale face. Only on one cheek burns an angry flush of red.

CHAPTER XXIX

They do not say "Good evening," or make any customary greetings. He perceives at once that they are suddenly beyond them. He perceives it with dismay.

Puzzle keeps his bristles stiffened, and growls thunderously. Out of his blinking, faded old eye he regards the lady surlily. He is himself a broken-down rake, and he assures his master, on his word of honour, that the female in black and sparkles is no good.

"You don't look very glad to see me," she says drearily; not, however, to Puzzle.

Mr. Beke does not tell her he is glad.

"I could not help it," she goes on. "I had no one else to go to."

"Is anything the matter?" he asks not unkindly.

Now it has never been claimed for Mr. Beke that he was remarkably unselfish. And to-night, of all nights, he was full of his own business. Of other people's business he rigorously steered clear, at any time; as he would

have expected them to keep out of his. And the folly of the visit irritated him.

When, therefore, without any roughness, he asked the lady if anything were amiss, I think Mr. Beke was treating her with almost surprising indulgence.

"The matter! Yes. Everything."

He had not asked her to sit down; he did not ask her now. Nor did she sit without invitation; but she came further into the room, and moved up and down in it with a cat-like restlessness.

For a time Puzzle watched her with the same undisguised disapproval; but at last, as though washing his hands of the matter, he flopped off the sofa and marched off to his master's bedroom. He was forbidden to lie on his master's bed, uninvited, but under the present circumstances he decided to risk it.

Mrs. Freke paced to and fro.

Mr. Beke, also black, in mess kit, watched her, leaning against the chair on which he had been sitting, which he held behind him with his hands.

"Do you want to tell me what *is* the matter?" he asks at last.

"We have had a row—Tubby and I," she replies, with a quick, dry laugh that reminds him of the lanes in Rentshire.

He does not interrupt, but waits patiently for her to continue.

"Not our first—by many," she goes on; "but by much our worst. And our last, I'm thinking."

Still he does not interrupt—with any easy remark as to that, at all events, being a good thing.

"He has been drinking," she says, "which again is not a new departure."

Mr. Beke moves a little; he is quite prepared to believe this; but was not prepared to hear it —from her.

"That," she cried, "is *nothing* new. He drank before we married; he drinks still. He promised once that he'd have drunk himself to death in six months; but that was before I went home, and he's broken his word. He'll never drink himself to death, but he'll go on drinking."

She has stopped in her march close to him, and their eyes meet; he says a word or two, meant for sympathy, awkwardly enough, as he knows, almost grudgingly. Why, in Heaven's name, should she come here, like Nicodemus, by night, to tell him this?

She moves away again upon her march.

"I have often thought," she cries bitterly, "I would drink too; but it's the one vice I cannot manage; nor can I forgive it in any one else."

She is again opposite him; the light of a lamp falls full on her haggard face.

"To-night he struck me," she says, pointing to her cheek, "full across the face! And not once only, again and again. He was not so drunk as to be helpless—he never is. It doesn't take him that way."

She looks up into the man's face above her, and she reads in it disgust, and some compassion; she gives all the disgust to her husband, and appropriates all the compassion.

"So," she stammers, "I ran away; and I came here: I was frightened, and I thought of you. Please don't mind so much."

Until she told him she had been frightened Osric had believed her. He had a simple faculty for believing the truth when he heard it; but he had also a singular capacity for recognizing a lie and disbelieving it. He saw at once that Mrs. Freke had not been frightened.

"Unfortunately," he says, "I do not see what good I can do."

"You can at least advise me," she urges.

"Even that," he answers, going somewhat too far in his modesty, "I do not feel sure about. Certainly not, to-night, on the spur of the moment; I should be afraid to advise. Perhaps, in the long run, I might suggest your

going home on another visit to your father, as you did before. But, after all——"

"Oh, don't you know," she cried, "Papa is dead!"

Her voice had the ring of genuine sorrow. She glanced down at her sable costume.

"It is for him," she says; "it's the only black evening gown I have. The news only came last night; I thought you would have heard."

No, he tells her, he had not heard. He says a word or two of sincere condolence. He thinks it a bad thing for her that the old man is gone. He was her one soft point. He was a link, and perhaps the last one, to home and some honest homely memories. This she too knows.

"It's all up now," she says. "Papa and his dear prosy letters kept me just on the line. Now I'm off. England is nothing to me any more, and I'm good enough at my worst for India."

"Listen," he said, interrupting her now, in his low, rather hard voice. "What is the good of you talking like that? It does you no good; and it does not strike me as a bit amusing."

"Amusing!" she cried. "Nothing is very amusing just now."

"Listen," he said again. "You will think me inhospitable, but I am going to make you go

away—we have been talking here a long while, and it is growing late. This is not only my bungalow, as you know, but Fane's too. And he may come in now at any moment. There is no use at all in his finding you here."

He spoke rather slowly, and very distinctly, as if he wanted her to understand quite plainly what must be done.

"I believe it would really be best," he added, "for you to go home alone. But I cannot let you go like that. It seems heartless. I will take you, only we must go now. I will get a wrap of some sort for you; not that we shall meet any one crossing the maidan . . . if my fellow hasn't packed everything up."

"Packed!"

"Yes, of course one is allowed scarcely any baggage, but——"

"Where are you going?" she cried piteously.

"Oh! I have had no chance of telling you. I was just beginning a note when you came in. I volunteered for service, you know, and they've accepted me."

She came quite close to him, staring wide-eyed up into his face.

"Oh!" she cried, stretching out her arms to him, and utterly unthinking of the senselessness of what she says—"oh, Osric! Take me with you."

From the veranda a cough, as of the charnel-house, announced the presence of Mr. Fane; but, alas! too late; the arms had been stretched out, and she had made her mad appeal.

After all Mr. Beke thinks he may be grateful for his friend's arrival. He will misunderstand, of course, but he will prevent!

CHAPTER XXX

If Bertie Fane was puzzled, Mr. Beke did not vouchsafe any explanation, either then or four hours later as they drove to Katara station.

Bertie had the reins, for Osric's left hand had been rather nastily bruised at polo that very afternoon, and he was anxious now to get it right again as soon as possible. It was Beke's cart, and the tat pulled—especially at night, like many other horses.

The moon was up—what we call the hunter's moon in England, for it was October. Mr. Beke had been a year in India, just three in the army. He was in his twenty-fifth year, and looked a good deal older.

They did not talk much, and the syce on the seat behind was half asleep. It was the most silent hour of the night.

That peculiar sense of elation had come back on Osric, and he was not anxious to betray it by talk. He looked about and noted each familiar point as they passed it. His bungalow was a new one, not far from the Residency.

(There is no Resident any longer at Katara, but the Collector lives there.) As they drove out of the gate he glanced along the Towli road, lying white under the moon, except where the banyan clump crowded up to it and blackened it for a space.

He had often driven along that road to the little sacred city, that lies asleep for ever on the river ghats, dreaming of Ganesh and Parwati, of God Vishnu and God Siva—the family god of the Mahratta warriors. He had taken photographs there, he and old Puzzle, of cloistered temple, and minaret and court. And Puzzle had sacrilegiously, though unobserved, waded gingerly out into the holy river with snuffling curiosity, to inspect some eddied twig or cork-blossom; into holy Yena or divine Krishna, there where they meet to wed and pass downward to the Konkan and the sea.

Turning left, towards the fort, they skirt the foot of its huge natural escarpments; then, with a single bend right, they pass the gates of half the bungalows in the station, their white boards duly announcing their sleeping occupants. There is something else white standing in the black shadows by the gate of the Frekes' bungalow. But Bertie Fane stares rigidly at the tat's twitching ears, and seems

hugely preoccupied by his driving. He is between Osric and the gate, and Osric himself sees nothing; he is looking over the cactus-hedge on his left towards the little church which looks so incongruously English under the moon of the southern night.

At the bottom of the hill they turn again, half left, and leave the well upon their right; the well much storied in Katara, the well where Mrs. Calverly first saw her husband's ghost. So up the bending hill again, past the little Catholic chapel and the Judge's big bungalow, and so out on to the station road.

Mr. Beke has no love for India, he is no more than tolerant of Katara, but he has lived ten months in it, and it has wrapped itself in ten months' trivial associations and memories, and comes out now, thus clad, to give him greeting of farewell, as he drives away in the night.

He wonders without much care either way, shall he ever see it again?

On the whole it seems likelier not. Should he return to his regiment after this campaigning, it seems scarcely likely he should be on detachment here again at once. And it is probable that he will not return to the Blacks, as there is talk of him becoming A.D.C. to his uncle, Lord Brailham.

So he turns half round in his seat, and

looking back, towards the towering fort, long disarmed, with the bazaar at its feet, he gives it all a casual and unmoved good-bye.

He is to be right, as it happens. No wheels of cart or tum-tum will ever bring him round this turn again, he will stand no more where Krishna and where Yena meet; over there, on the racecourse, he will play no more polo; up there, among the hills that climb upward to Mahableshwar, he will join no more "fool-feast," poggle-khana, picnics.

This stage in Mr. Beke's simple tale is over, and will tell itself no more.

It belongs to what is past, as soon he will himself belong to it, as soon will you, my patient reader, and I.

The night sighs a little, and draws its leaves about it with a slight shiver, as the young man passes on. To the dark queen, who watches while the world sleeps, each passer is but one other of the world-old procession, moving down restlessly to the shore of death.

But no such clouds of thought darken Mr. Beke's mind. It is rather Bertie Fane who feels a bit down. It is always less cheerful to be left behind; and, at this moment, comparing Katara's trivial round with what Beke is hastening to share, he finds life suddenly grown stale and un-worth-while.

And he is vastly devoted to Beke, and will miss him dismally—at first.

He tries loyally not to think at all of Mrs. Freke, or give way to any wonderings. But he secretly imagines that Beke must be feeling the wrench of parting badly.

Honest Bertie Fane! He is a well-brought-up, wholesome-minded young man as one could meet, with no real sympathy whatever for love-making with other people's wives. Nevertheless he does inwardly respect Mr. Beke all the more for the wonderings he cannot help.

And so, on the little platform at Katara station, the two friends part, with the quiet night breathing fragrantly about them. And Bertie Fane drives back dismally to the empty bungalow whither Mrs. Freke came, so uninvited, last night; for that is already yesterday, and seems far off. And Mr. Beke and Puzzle go northwards, setting themselves with elaborate care and comfort down to sleep.

And they, too, shall meet again; these two young men who have walked a bit together down life's pleasant, foolish highway—meet where each shall know all about the other, they tell us, and there shall be no further wonderings, but we shall know as we are known.

Mr. Beke's northward journey was long, and

became tedious, extending to nearly a week of shifting but lagging days and nights. Until Bombay it was all known and familiar; the uplands of the Deccan, lifting constantly into weird, fort-like hills, scarped and bastioned with rock. Then Poona, with its river and its Bund; across it to the other station, and so uphill to Khandala, and very fiercely downhill, thereafter, through the Ghauts. Most beautiful they looked, with new green forests clambering round their steep knees, with woven falls of leaping silver; but their beauty struck without appealing to Mr. Beke. It was not lost on him, as has before been said, but it was wasted. He would have given it all for an English midland landscape laying by her modest summer finery, against her silent winter sleep.

From the reversing station downwards, with swift eagerness, to the Konkan. And so across the flat, green marshes, by many emerald islets, across gaps of sapphire water to Salsette, and at length Bombay.

Another change of stations; out of the Boree Bunda, like a Gothic cathedral within, like a Venetian palace without, into the ghâri, and so down to Colaba.

He can just see Parel as he turns in his seat and looks back; Parel, where east and west are met together and hopelessly entangled.

And now he passes through the great and far more beautiful Paris of the East. By the post office, like a Doge's palace, set about with trees where green parrots flash to and fro; the University, serene and grandiose, reflective, large and calm; the different public offices, all palaces, girt with tropic belts of Eden.

And, behind all, Back Bay, and its crescent of blue sea and saffron strand, backed by the fringed black ridge of Malabar Hill, the dark tangle of its groves pierced by the pale pointing fingers of the Towers of Silence.

And thus, with sea at either hand, along Colaba to the B.B. and C.I. railway station.

Northwards towards Surat; northwards across the Imperial Nerbudda into Baroda, the Garden City of the great Cow-keeper. Northwards into Gujerât and the City of Shah Ahmed its great conqueror; where one must wait, and where, interested but unmoved, Mr. Beke drives swiftly to see the glory of Shah Alim's tomb, and the white splendours of the Jain Temple that Hachi Singh built to his God and His four and twenty Hierarchs.

Out through the red walls again, and back to the train—narrow-gauge now; and northwards again by east, to Palanpur; by Mount Abu with its long tale of unequalled temples;

through Rajputana, by Jeypur, in sight of empty Amber City, to Ulwar—and to Agra.

Day after day the Indian landscape rolls itself changeful, unchanging, by. The big grey monkeys race the train in Baroda State; the bare and treeless Rajput fields spread right and left, the day grows out of the mist; the night lifts itself, on elbow, out of the unloved, unknown horizon, and sprawls athwart the sky. And still Mr. Beke and Puzzle hurry, not too swiftly, northward, and survey the twisting landscape as it goes, with cold, observant, untender eyes.

Agra is past, and Delhi; and Mr. Beke has seen the Taj and the Jasmine Tower of the fort, riddled with British shell; the Moti Masjid—both of them, at Delhi and at Agra, the Diwan-i-Kas, the hall where stood the peacock throne, the Kashmir Gate.

And still northwards, with tedious slow haste, he is carried on.

CHAPTER XXXI

Mr. Beke of the Blacks came back no more to Katara in the Deccan. But news of him came thither, more than once.

They still play polo on the racecourse beyond the fort, eastwards from the bazaar; but only one of Mr. Beke's ponies is seen there, and that is ridden by Gore of the police, who bought it, and who does not look so well on it as its old master. He does not, to judge by appearances, feel so well on it either.

But as the polo-players chat, between the quarters, it sometimes happens that Captain Beke's name is still mentioned. For he has upheld the honour of the Blacks, and there comes talk of his name in dispatches and rumours of promotion or of distinction. These latter are not held of much account by the knowing, for Osric's general is his kinsman and a man desperately afraid of being accused of nepotism.

"With Gummy Grey," declares Epps, of the I.M.S., "Beke would stand a better chance of

a brevet if he were an outsider, from some tin-pot corps no one never heard of. It's dead against him, being a future lord, and one of the Blacks, and Lady Gray's cousin."

It is October, not still, but again. And Katara is looking its prettiest. There is a new detachment from Poona; and there is a new Assistant Judge; the Chaplain's wife has had twins in honour of the Diamond Jubilee: and there are no other changes at Katara.

Except one. And that is that Mrs. Freke is a widow. Soon after Christmas the Second-in-Command fulfilled a long overdue promise and died, as was believed, of drink, as was said of collapse after enteric fever. Anyway he died, and Mrs. Freke seemed sorrier than one would have expected.

" . . . You see," she explained to old Mrs. Tompion, "he was the only husband I had. So I miss him. He treated me badly enough —at times. But I wasn't always at my best either. So we squared up before he went and begged each other's pardon. He said it gave him a better go-off; and he shouldn't start quite so handicapped. I hope he'll get in all right—ultimately. I half wished I could do like Mrs. Fonseca, the apothecary's wife, when her husband dropped dead; she told me she gave ten rupees to the Goanese priest for

masses to start him. I'm sure I'd give them if it would do poor Tubby (Archibald, I mean) any good."

"My dear," says Mrs. Tompion, much scandalized. "You'd much better give five rupees to the Compassionate Fund."

Mrs. Freke sent Mr. Beke a funeral card; displaying a female figure leaning on a broken pillar, under the shade of a weeping-willow tree consisting of one branch like a very fine ostrich feather. The figure was generally understood to be merely allegorical; it bore no resemblance to Mrs. Freke; and its costume was not that of widows in our day. Excess of grief, indeed, had caused it to reduce all costume to very classical limits. Moreover the card was familiar to Katara, it being the only local pattern: so that the grief of the female under the willow had been witnessed before on several occasions.

Mr. Beke replied in a brief letter of condolement that he found very difficult to compose.

Towards the end of the rains Mrs. Freke wrote to him, in autograph this time, and hinted that the Colonel was beginning to suggest to her the inadvisability of remaining a widow. What did Mr. Beke think? Of course there was no idea of any change of condition on her part till after Christmas. By Christmas

Mr. Beke understood his correspondent to refer rather to the anniversary of the poor Major's decease than to the anniversary of Christ's Nativity. This reply Mr. Beke found much less difficult, as poor Mrs. Freke gathered easily when she read it. She sighed a little and decided to make the best of the Colonel.

He was scarcely older than the late Second in Command, and he was a gentleman; he was well off, and many persons considered him good-looking. He had certainly smartened up in his dress a good deal since the New Year. He was a C.B., and it was not, Mrs. Freke considered, impossible that the Diamond Jubilee might prefix a K. to the other letters.

She thought of all these things, as it were resignedly, and sighed—thinking no doubt of the late Major.

And so we leave Katara, and turn to other old friends: to wit the Honourable Gerald O'Rorke, Attaché to Her Britannic Majesty's Legation at Brussels and Miss Hartington, still of Weldon Paddocks, Rentshire.

It is October there, as well as in India; and Miss Hartington has her house full.

There are the Wydgates, which include Miss Van Arnhem; there are the Brailhams, Lady Brailham being a kinswoman of Judith, just as Lord Brailham is a maternal uncle of

Osric's; there is Lady Brailham's nephew, Lord St. Edmundsbury, hope of the house of Ipswich; there is a woman who has just written the "book of the season"; and there is a man who has just added an island, somewhere, to the British Empire. He tries to throw a glamour of local interest over his island by telling his present company that it is exactly the size of Rentshire.

"Good hunting there?" inquires Mr. O'Rorke, who, as his hostess assures him, has not improved or altered; which, as he supposes, are the same thing.

The Empire-Maker admits that his island is a conical extinct volcano, rising to an altitude of five thousand feet. Whereupon his hearers recollect that Rentshire is the smallest county in England.

But, besides the party above mentioned, there is Sir Paul de Visors, who is abjectly engaged to Lady Gladys Malapert, and Lady Gladys herself, chaperoned by her aunt, Lady Drysdale, who is a Bed-Chamber Woman of credit and renown. There is also the Honourable Wagbert Malapert, chaperoning himself, who is understood to be a gentleman-usher, only no one can remember the colour of his rod.

There is a divine who is called late Bishop *in* Somaliland, and signs himself "Yours faith-

fully, J. K. Somaliland and British Equatorial Africa," and who is seldom to be seen so far from Belgravia as at present. And finally there is Mr. O'Rorke, Miss Hartington herself, and a duenna.

"My dear," says the last named, "if you do not want me I will go up-stairs and write to my nephew."

Miss Hartington assures her that she can temporarily exist without her, and the pretty old lady slips away discreetly. She always calls Miss Hartington "My dear," because that lady refuses to be addressed as "Miss Hartington," and she can never bring herself to call her "Freda"—though she has often practised it on her wicker dress-stand.

"That's an excellent old woman," observes Mr. O'Rorke, watching her departure complacently.

It is about six o'clock: every one has had tea, and they are now alone in the primrose-coloured saloon. The rest of the party have melted away, either up-stairs or to the billiard-room.

"She doesn't do her duty," replies Miss Hartington.

"What is her duty?"

"Well, what she is paid for, I suppose, is to be my chaperon."

"That's to keep out of your way, and be a decent fiction," suggests Mr. Gerald O'Rorke.

"Not at all. Seeing the rest of the party disappear she ought to sit opposite you and me in that chair, tatting. Had I known that she could not 'tat' I would not have considered her application for a moment."

Mr. O'Rorke laughs cheerfully.

"She's a ripper," he declares.

"Her predecessor," says Miss Hartington, "married the Vicar. I always intended to marry this one to Mr. Prance: he was very well off, and she would have cheered him up. But I wasn't in time and he died. I scarcely see how to place her."

"Well, in my opinion," repeats Gerry, "she understands her business to perfection."

"I wonder what she says to her nephew," remarks Freda.

The young man laughs.

"She hasn't got a nephew," he says. "He's a myth. I bet you sixpence she's reading a shilling novel now, in her bedroom, with her feet on the fender."

Presently Mr. O'Rorke abandons his seat on the music-stool—where he had been playing the intermezzo out of *Cavalleria Rusticana* with one finger—and comes to sit much nearer Miss Hartington.

He looks along one of his legs to see how his foot is getting on, and says plaintively, "I wish it wasn't the twenty-seventh!"

"Twenty-seven what?"

"Twenty-seventh day of the month—evening prayer, Psalm the hundred-and-first."

"What *do* you mean?"

"Well, isn't to-morrow the twenty-eighth? And aren't we all to go away on the twenty-eighth?"

"Oh," laughs his hostess, "that's it, is it? Well, you know, that is *my* loss."

"You don't seem to feel it very much," he complains in an injured tone.

"That's because I am so brave," she answers, "like the 'sporting' boy you used to tell us of, who let the serpent gnaw his 'vittles' without making any remark."

"I don't believe," asserts Gerry, gloomily, "that you've got any serpent there."

"Oh; yes I have. . . . I'm sure I shall miss the Bishop very much."

"Bother the Bishop," observes the impious young man.

"If you're going to abuse my guests!" the lady says with dignity.

He keeps moodily silent for a very long time. All things go by comparison, and the attaché speaks no more for seventeen seconds.

"Well, anyway," he begins again, penitently, "it was very good of you to ask me."

She laughs heartily.

"Indeed, after your letter I could scarcely help myself," she replies.

Mr. O'Rorke is annoyed.

"It was," she adds, politely, by way of peace-offering, "very good of you to come."

"I came *hopping!*" he declares, with his delightful grin of restored good humour.

"I am sure," she remarks, "it is very polite of you to say so."

"I couldn't be telling a lie, you know," he says.

"Ah!" she observes, as one in receipt of information.

"Not," he explains, "when there's nothing in life to be got by it."

"Oh, no!" she agrees, cordially.

CHAPTER XXXII

At that moment, six thousand miles away, there came from the ridge of the hill the ping of a bullet and a man fell forward, his own rifle clattering down among the loose slag.

A hot wetness made itself felt inside his shirt, and a peculiar, menacing sensation began to creep about his heart.

He had dragged himself on to his side, and, in falling, had stumbled out of the moonlight into a deep shadow of rock. He did not suppose they could see him still, but, of course, they might come down. He was reconnoitring and they were, evidently, aware of it. On the whole he did not consider his chances "up to much"—unless he was followed from camp.

His thoughts, as may be perceived, come rather jerkily, in unrounded periods.

Also, he would like to know, is he bleeding to death? He has never bled to death before, and he really has no idea how it ought to feel:

but . . . he should suppose very much . . . like . . . this.

He pulls himself together with a sudden steadiness, that is merely a recurrence to himself, to himself as he is normally.

Of course people have bled to death, frequently. And there would be . . . nothing . . . nothing anomalous about his doing it . . . if he were to do it . . . not exactly . . . anomalous . . . he would like a better word. Nothing . . . nothing *hors-de-règle* . . . but what's the English word? Irregular? . . . Out of order? . . . No. But—but one should never bleed to death if one can help it. . . .

He lifts up the wounded right leg, and, with very great difficulty, so places it as to keep the blood out of it as much as possible, or so he thinks. And then he holds the place with his own hands. His fingers are long and brown and hard, rather good fingers for clutching anything very tight. If he can keep from fainting . . . for he supposes that that rising sensation round the heart means that.

He is not thinking at all about his wound, although he seems to himself to be thinking of nothing else. He is, for one thing, much occupied by the solution of an acrostic, in a rather obsolete *Vanity Fair* that some one had sent them from home: the uprights were

FRONTIER and MALAKAND. He had made out all but the seventh light: E and N.

> "They said 'twas odd: but if 'twas not 'twas this
> That such a chance so wise a prude should miss."

And another thing drummed itself, wearily, into his thoughts. Puzzle was lost, where was he? He had been absent without leave since before dinner. Now, Puzzle was usually a most punctual dog.

Other thoughts came, connected and disconnected, or seeming disconnected; for the thin gold chain of linking association is too fine for our exterior consciousness.

Osric remembered that it was his old nurse's birthday, and that she was fifty to-day. And he remembered a certain highly gilded, but exiguous, teacup on her mantelpiece. He gave her that himself, and the saucer belonging to it, fifteen years ago on her thirty-fifth birthday. And Joan gave her a yard measure that rolled up into a vegetable ivory vase. He tried to remember what Lionel gave, but could not. Perhaps Lionel gave nothing; he very seldom had any money to buy anything with. Poor Lionel!

He wondered whether, after all, he should die first. Lionel was certainly dying. Was he, too?

The valley was narrow and the top of the hills at each side were fringed with boulders. The moon shone down and showed their shape. He couldn't see the north side, but he could see the south. He could hear the river swishing coldly along among its stones. One could hear nothing else. A scrubby brush grew among the boulders by the river: higher up the valley was stony and naked. The bushes looked weird and ugly in the night, like crouching ambuscades of ruthless enemies.

But the moon, behind the ridge opposite, looked friendly and homely.

ὦ πότνια, πότνια, νύξ!

he quoted suddenly to himself; or, rather, something in the folded recesses of his memory quoted to him.

He heard some stones dislodged. Were they coming down to look for him? The people who had shot him?

Something white was creeping along under the cliffs: and these people wore white. In and out: in and out: with a persistent, leisurely searching. But one could only hear the cold swish of the river through its confusion of slag and boulder.

At last the search ended, close to where

Osric lay : and the searcher sniffed and grinned obsequiously.

"Oh, Puzzle! is it you?" whispered his master.

* * * * * *

Puzzle had an accomplishment.

He was not a dog much given to tricks, which, indeed, he considered, very justly, beneath his dignity. But he could carry his master's gloves, and there existed a special pair sacred to the purpose.

When he came swiftly into the tent his master shared with Captain Willoughby, A.D.C., that officer considered the old dog attentively.

"You seem uncommon bluggy," he observed. And Puzzle blinked one eye disconsolately, as though deprecating, and not denying, the circumstance.

Having admitted so much, Puzzle ignored Captain Willoughby, and poked about for the gloves, securing both with extreme scrupulosity. Which done, he sallied out into the moonlight stealthily.

But not alone this time, for Captain Willoughby has been much interested, and he, as he tells himself, joins the cortège. Captain Willoughby, in his way, is nearly as intelligent as Puzzle. Presently Surgeon-Lieutenant MacGregor joins the cortège too.

"Have you seen anything of Beke, of the Blacks?" he inquires mysteriously from the door of his little hospital tent.

"No," replies the A.D.C., "but I'm thinking I soon shall."

He points silently to old Puzzle marching stoutly off in the darkness.

"I'm going too," he observes; "and if that dilapidated old beast don't get a D.S.O. for to-night's work I'm Barabas's grandmother."

Whereupon Surgeon-Lieutenant MacGregor and his revolver and rifle are also added to the cortège.

And so it comes to pass that Mr. Beke does not bleed to death on that occasion, but is brought back to camp, owing his life, as was universally admitted, to Puzzle's one accomplishment.

"Did you send for the gloves?" they asked.

"Oh yes. I sent him. It was rather difficult to explain that I wanted them; he appeared to have some delicacy, under the circumstances, about leaving me. But I went on saying, 'Gloves, Puzzle,' so persistently that a light seemed to break on him at last. And he slunk off to fetch them."

CHAPTER XXXIII

But of all these events, on the far northern frontier of our Indian Empire, Mr. Gerald O'Rorke and Miss Hartington knew, of course, at that present, nothing whatever.

It is only half-past six in England, and there is an hour yet before dressing-time.

"I must say," complains Mr. O'Rorke, "I'd like to see a little more natural feeling—when we're parting to-morrow."

"It wouldn't do for me to break down," she urges demurely. "I have to try and put a good face on it."

He gets up and applies his back to the mantelpiece, regarding her thence lugubriously.

"I wonder," she remarks, "if you know how much those Dresden vases cost? They belonged to Marie Antoinette."

"God rest her soul," says Mr. O'Rorke, "I don't know and I don't care."

"*Temper*," quotes Miss Hartington, "A Tale. By Mrs. Opie."

He abandons the mantelpiece, and returns to his chair.

"*Must* I go?" he demands, abruptly. Then, with smiling courage adds cravenly, "To-morrow?"

"How long," inquires Miss Hartington, "were you wanting to prolong your visit?"

"Indefinitely" says Mr. O'Rorke, blushing furiously.

"Well," says Miss Hartington, not blushing at all, "I don't know about that: I'm going to Eresby, you see, for Christmas."

"Oh! So am I. We might go—together."

"Or separately," suggests she, as an amendment.

At that moment there is a weighty footstep in the drawing-room: which, as may be remembered, opens by a wide archway out of the saloon. With a scowl and a growl Mr. O'Rorke returns to his mantelpiece. It is the Bishop.

"Ah!" he says, "I was looking for you, Miss Hartington. I have found that map. I was quite sure I had it somewhere."

He advances into the room holding the map with one hand and patting it with the other, "like a man in a statue" as Mr. O'Rorke tells himself.

"That," says the Bishop, "is the spot where my poor Archdeacon was—massacred."

He covers with his forefinger a strip of territory about six hundred miles long by a hundred broad.

"I always thought," objects Mr. O'Rorke, "that you couldn't 'massacre' only one person at a time."

"That," remarks his hostess, "was your ignorance."

The Bishop is somewhat deaf. Admirals, Field-Marshals and Prelates are almost invariably a little hard of hearing. He does not catch this parenthesis, but he smiles sadly. The smile is to show he quite follows: the sadness is a tribute to the late Venerable Archdeacon of the Equatorial Congo.

"How dreadful!" yells Miss Hartington, much too loud, into his best ear.

"Yes," says the Bishop, recoiling a little, and softly rubbing the afflicted member ("like Malachi," as Mr. O'Rorke observes in a sepulchral aside to his hostess).

"It was after that," explains the good man, "that pressure was put upon me to resign. At that time I had not only myself to think of."

The allusion is evidently to the late Mrs. Somaliland and the little Equatorial Africas—or so Mr. O'Rorke asserts *sotto voce.*

"I was not a widower then," says the Bishop, with another smile, and a slight pathetic lifting

of the eyes towards the wallowing cupids on the painted ceiling. Immediately above the cupids is Lady Wydgate's bedroom; but his lordship's thoughts pass higher, to the skies.

Miss Hartington sees no reason why he should remain a widower. She thinks how kindly her good duenna would look after the four little Equatorial Africas.

"Mrs. Primmer," she shouts, aiming at the other ear this time, "will be so much interested. She is so *very* much interested in Somaliland."

"And British Equatorial Africa," adds Gerry.

The Bishop smiles less pathetically, more benignantly.

"She is searching all over the library at this moment," declares Gerry unblushingly, "for a map of Somaliland. She won't be happy till she gets it."

"I think," says the good man, "I will go and show it to her. I almost wonder we did not meet: I have just come from the library."

"Oh," explains Mr. O'Rorke, "she had to go up-stairs first to her room for a handkerchief."

The Bishop departs.

Miss Hartington flings up her hands.

"I am momentarily expecting," she declares, "to see the ground open and swallow you up."

"It wasn't Ananias the earth swallowed up,"

says the attaché naïvely. "It was Korah, Dathan and Abiram. Or Marcus Curteis," he adds, with sudden incertitude.

"Where *do* you expect to go to?" she demands.

"Heaven," he replies, promptly. "I intend to repent; I've got a lot of other things to get repented of, and I'll be doing it all in a heap one of these days."

Mr. O'Rorke finds it far from easy to reduce the conversation to its former tone of pathos. Though he sighs dismally and assumes the demeanour of an undertaker.

"Look here," he says at last, "I may as well take 'No' to-night as any other night."

"Take what?"

"Take 'No.' If it's got to come it may just as well come at once and be done with."

"Oh, I see. Well, what do you want me to say 'No' to?"

"I don't *want* you to say 'No.' I want you to say 'Yes'—if only you'll be so sweet and obliging." . . .

He pauses and eyes her curiously. She has a fine air of unconsciousness which the young man finds justly irritating.

"I wish to glory," he blurts out, with the sanguine man's sudden lapse into despondency, "that I wasn't so deathly poor!"

She looks up with a mild sympathy.

"I suppose," she says, "that you are not very rich."

He grins all over his delightful Irish countenance.

"My face is my fortune!" he assures her candidly.

"Ah," she says, gravely sympathetic, "I didn't know you were so badly off as that!"

They both laugh cheerfully.

"I wonder that you can make both ends meet," she adds, by way of "top ornament to her pleasantry," as he tells her subsequently.

At which moment Lord St. Edmundsbury breaks in upon their *tête-à-tête*. He perceives it is a *tête-à-tête* and looks about inquiringly, as if in search of a pretext for incontinent withdrawal.

But Mr. O'Rorke is irritated and unjust.

"She's not here," he says; "she's in the morning-room writing to Ossy Beke, of the Blacks—it's the Injun mail to-morrow."

"I was looking for Lord Brailham," declares the future Duke of Ipswich mendaciously, but with dignity. He is private secretary to that distinguished nobleman.

"Well, he's not under the table," declares Gerry, "nor behind that picture either. He scarcely ever gets into those places now."

These gibes are lost on Lord St. Edmundsbury, who has stalked off, determined to hear none of them.

"Bad cess to all these interruptions," growls the injured attaché with an intense air of annoyance.

"What interruptions?" demands Miss Hartington innocently, and without any appearance of annoyance at all.

Mr. O'Rorke snorts viciously and throws a log of wood on to the fire as though it were the heads of his enemies.

"All these superfluous Bishops," he says, "and Marquesses."

Miss Hartington raises her eyebrows slightly in mute expostulation at his rhetorical exaggeration.

"He isn't even one marquess," she protests, alluding to Lord St. Edmundsbury.

It is the pride of the ducal house of Ipswich that its eldest son is an earl, not a marquess.

Mr. O'Rorke betrays no interest in Lord St. Edmundsbury's grade in the peerage.

"You were saying," Miss Hartington reminds him, "how little capital you had."

"And how little interest you had—in me," he adds incorrectly.

"I do not remember anything about that," she said, lifting her eyes to his inquiringly.

She had risen from her seat as if about to end their *tête-à-tête*. The Dresden clock has bade them remember that it is seven o'clock already, and that time bustles ever onward, splashing its trivial drops into Eternity. He stands very near her, and his comely head is bent over her. A shadow lies behind his eyes, the shadow of deep and quiet disappointment. There was something he had got to say, something he had been trying all this while to say, and which yet, he finds, it is—as things are—beyond him to get said. She is, after all, too rich. He cannot suggest to her such a bargain in cold blood.

So, she sees his face downcast with a quiet resolution to accept disappointment. And she cannot but think how handsome and honest his face is, she cannot but admire his upright bigness. Nor can she help liking him the better for that which shuts his mouth.

Though he is standing straight in front of her he does not seem to have any thought of trying to prevent her going. Again she lifts her dark eyes to his, and feels her own tremble a little. He looks down into her face in silence.

Silence is so rare in him that it does not fail to be impressive.

"Gerry," she says, "must you really go to-morrow?"

"Not if you would rather I should stay," he replies, a sudden flame of hope lightening in his eyes.

"I would *much* rather," she says simply.

They do not move any nearer to each other. The Dresden clock ticks fussily behind his back. He hears it very plainly. He listens to it with a kind of anxious scrupulosity, as though it were important he should catch each click as it breaks on the warm stillness of the room.

"I am trying," the young man says presently, "to realize my luck. It is not at all easy."

She drops her eyes to the floor and notices what big feet he has—not, probably, for the first time.

"I have been trying," he goes on, in the same quiet, subdued voice, so unlike his ordinary loud, cheery tone, "to ask you for two years. But I haven't had the face. Whenever a chance came I was ashamed."

"And so," she says, lifting her eyes once more, "I have had to do it at last."

"You!" he protests. "What nonsense!"

"No," she repeats quietly, "it is not nonsense; I asked."

He has always rejoiced in her splendid straightforwardness. He watches her now with a kind of astonished admiration.

"I saw," she continues, "that you would never get your question asked in time—we must really go and dress—and if you went away to-morrow, without asking, I fancied you would not try again. You have tried so often."

Yes, he admits that he has tried, and failed, many times to ask that question. Too much depended on the answer.

CHAPTER XXXIV

At dinner Miss Hartington sat between Lord St. Edmundsbury and Lord Wydgate. When the servants had left the room the old peer made a little speech.

"As to-night is our last night here together," he said, "and there have been so many pleasant gatherings round this most hospitable table, I would like to ask you to join with me in drinking a toast which will, I know beforehand, be highly agreeable to you all,"

They filled their glasses and looked intelligent.

"It is to Miss Hartington, of course," Lord Wydgate continued, "that I invite you to drink."

They smile and nod, as though calling each other to witness their general intelligence. They had all guessed it.

"For my part," the old man goes on, "I have been so fond of dear Miss Hartington that it is with some natural and selfish regret that I learn we are to lose her."

Some of them look as intelligent as ever; some try to look twice as full of intelligence as before; and one sees that they are slightly mystified.

"Mrs. Gerald O'Rorke," pursues Lord Wydgate, bringing his little oration to a close, "will, no doubt, be a delightful person. We all know her husband to be one of the most delightful of men. But we have not met Mrs. O'Rorke yet, and we can scarcely bear to think of losing Miss Hartington."

Lord St. Edmundsbury fancied that Miss Van Arnhem was something less vivacious than usual during that dinner, and her mother observed it too.

Gerry O'Rorke, to every one's surprise, was also more subdued than was his boisterous custom. He seemed, if such an idea was not ridiculous, to be rather shy.

As for Miss Hartington, a new and pleasant light shone in her kindly eyes, and she looked beautiful.

When she thought all the rest were gone to bed she slipped into Judith's room, and found her in the deep oriel of her window, gazing out, absent-mindedly, on to the moonlit gardens.

Judith turned at her friend's voice, and said, with a little laugh, "I've been star-gazing."

She came out of the window, drawing the warm and heavy curtains back into their place, and moved across towards the comfortable light of the fireside.

"Is anything the matter?" asks her friend.

Freda is perplexed. She knows that she has come for congratulations, but Judith looks tired and sad.

"That is just what I cannot tell," is the latter's answer, "but I feel as if there were."

They both stand on the thick warm rug, and Judith looks down, with the same absent-minded expression, into the palpitating red heart of the fire.

Freda says nothing, but watches her, still puzzled.

"I ought to be congratulating you," says Judith, without looking up, "and I do. You know I always liked him. Yes, and I know, too, that he always liked you. And if you two are not happy together, none of us have any chance of it."

"My dear," says Freda, the happy light glowing in her eyes, "*you two will be as happy as we.*"

Judith looks up slowly and says quietly, "Oh, I? Perhaps I shall die an old maid."

The other girl laughs softly.

"Why should you do that?" she exclaims, with pleasant incredulity.

"It is as well to die an old maid if you cannot marry the only man you would care to live with."

"But why *not* marry him?" urges her friend, cheerfully, "what should prevent it?"

Judith sits down in a great arm-chair, and clasps her pretty hands before her on her lap, and her eyes go back wistfully to the ruddy blaze.

"His death," she answers, not at once, "would prevent it, would it not?"

"Oh, Judy!" cried her friend, coming closer to her and sitting down on the rug beside her knee, "why do you say that? Is there any bad news?"

"None that has anything to do with that. None that really matters much, to be honest, to me, at all. . . . Papa got a telegram to-night. Lionel Beke is really dying now, and Sir Lionel and Lady Beke have started at once for Cannes. If every one were not going away to-morrow, I suppose we should go in any case. It would be the proper thing, and papa always does the proper thing. . . . He would say nothing about it to you, or any one here, because he did not want anything dismal to be told you to-night."

"But," says Freda, wonderingly, "this has nothing to do with Osric or you."

Miss Van Arnhem shakes her head, half impatiently.

"No, no; nothing at all. I said so. On the contrary, he will now ask me."

"I thought somehow," says her friend, "that you were engaged to each other already."

"Well, to tell you the truth, I think we are. I believe he would not care to marry any one but me. And I believe he knows that I think that. And I have simply been waiting for him to ask me—to say 'Yes.'"

"I thought that was it," declared Freda, cheerfully.

"And now," pursued Judith, "he will be in every way at least my equal in fortune and all that . . . so he would not wait any longer. But——"

"But what?" asked the other girl, wondering.

She had never in the least expected to find Judith like this, any more than she had looked to find Gerry O'Rorke tongue-tied and modest.

"Suppose," cried Judith, shivering, "that something should happen to him—should have happened to him already?"

"My dear Judy, why *should* you suppose it?"

"Why? I cannot tell. But I do suppose it."

"Judy, dear girl, you have been, as you said, moon-gazing, and it has made you nervous, and upset—and unlike yourself."

"Perhaps I am unlike myself. You are right about my being nervous and out of . . . . out of gear. But it came on before the moon-gazing. I have felt the same all the evening, since before dinner. I was sitting here, exceedingly comfortable and pleasant, reading dear old *Cranford*, that I found in the bookcase over yonder. And suddenly there came a horrible, deathly sinking at the heart—an irresistible feeling of impending disaster."

Miss Hartington had not much to urge by way of comment or comfort. She laid her hand caressingly on her friend's arm, and such amenities were not common with either of them.

Judith still looks into the fire, and her face is white in spite of its glow.

"I had to stop reading," she goes on, "nor could I talk, or do anything. It is a horrible feeling, as if you were sinking down out of your own body into the floor."

"And this is the first time you ever had it?"

"No; not the first, the second. The other

time was just before my brother—Derek—died. I had been playing battledore and shuttlecock in the big hall at Wydgate, just seeing how long I could keep the shuttlecock up, you know. It was not late—about four o'clock on a November afternoon, and it was raining outside. I had kept the shuttlecock up to nine hundred and eleven (I shall always hate that number, and always hate the 'tack-tack' of a shuttlecock against a battledore) when the same horrible, deadly sense of misfortune came. There was nothing to be afraid of, and I was not frightened. Only in a moment I was utterly miserable, as if one's heart was *eclipsed*, and one became all dark inside."

"And did anything happen? Was there really anything amiss?"

"Derek died. He was dying then—only I did not know it — on the *Britannia* at Dartmouth, and now there is something the matter with Osric."

On these occasions the persons least concerned are perhaps the most to be pitied. A demand is made upon their sympathy, which rather overdraws it. They are sure to feel that the real trials in life are sufficiently numerous, the actual and indubitable losses and so on, without what seems almost wilful

affliction of oneself by a forecast of woe that will probably prove quite illusory.

Freda Hartington goes away at last in an unsatisfactory condition of mind. She half accuses herself of failing in the matter of sympathy, and yet it is not easy to see how, in such a case, sympathy had better show itself.

And such a mood in Judith is a revelation. They have been excellent friends for years, and yet they have not quite been intimate. To-night is their first confidence. And Judith has always seemed hitherto very self-sufficing: cheerful, pleasant, good-tempered, and good-natured; but almost hard, with a kind of dry absence of sentiment or softness.

In the morning most of Miss Hartington's guests depart. The Wydgates do not leave till after luncheon, the reason being that they are taking her back with them to Eresby, whither Mr. O'Rorke is also bound.

On arrival at Eresby there are several telegrams—one from Cannes announcing that Lionel is slowly sinking; and one, sent on by Joan Beke from London, briefly stating that Lieutenant Beke, of the Blacks, has been seriously wounded, but is doing well.

Lord Wydgate cables out at once for further

particulars, and they come within a few hours. The danger had been collapse from loss of blood, but that is now over. Owing to consequent weakness his recovery will be slow, but there is no cause whatever for anxiety.

CHAPTER XXXV

On old Christmas Day Mrs. Freke suffered herself to be led, as the *Katara Press* said, to the "Hymnal" altar; and on the same date Miss Hartington also ceased to exist. But it was not a double wedding, owing to geographical and other causes.

The same *Morning Post*, however, announced both, with the addition, in Mrs. Freke's case, of the parenthetic and oath-like observation—"By cable." On the announcement of Gerry O'Rorke's engagement to so considerable an heiress as Miss Hartington, several of those who sat in the seats of the mighty remembered their relationship to the late Lord Athlone's fourth son, and silver teapots arrived from those who would certainly have sent only teaspoons (six and a sugar tongs) had the attaché gone and engaged himself to a fourth daughter of some other Irish Viscount. The loan of half-a-dozen smart country houses for the first part of the honeymoon was offered;

and that of Bloxworth was accepted "because," as the bridegroom explained to the principal bridesmaid, "Uncle Bloxy hasn't got any other house fussing about in the neighbourhood."

Thus familiarly did the attaché speak to Miss Van Arnhem of Lord Bloxworth, than whom a fatter Earl was never belted.

Miss Van Arnhem had recovered her spirits. Though Mr. Beke's wound was serious enough to keep him a long while in hospital, it was all right now, and the war was over.

Lord Brailham had been elevated from the Governorship of Singapore to that of the Samson Islands, which, as every one knew, was a lift indeed. The Samson Islands are not the largest group of islands in the world, but they are immensely important: in fact, if there were not any Samson Islands the Eastern question would scarcely be worth asking. And the Governorship of these insular bones of contention is regarded as a sign and seal of approval which is universally recognized. So that Lord Brailham began to think that neither Canada nor India need be regarded as now beyond his reach. It is not that the Samsons are a beautiful collection of islands, on the contrary they are flat, barren and uninteresting; but then, as Lord Brailham impressed on Lady Brailham,

"they are so strategic—so very strategic," he repeated, much pleased with his word.

Nor are these islands noted for the salubrity of their climate, or their convenient situation. "But then," once more to quote their new Governor, "they are nothing like so unhealthy as Sierra Leone, and old Sir Muddle Duddle lived eleven years at Sierra Leone, and came back to marry his fourth wife."

"I suppose," remarks Lady Brailham, "the first three died there?"

Lord Brailham is disappointed at his wife's insistence on detail, but admits that they expired "somewhere in the neighbourhood."

"And the Samsons, you say, are nine thousand miles from London! That," declares Lady Brailham, "is outrageous."

"I have been thinking," remarks his Excellency, as if he had not heard her, "about St. Edmundsbury's appointment as Colonial Secretary—that, of course, is a very different matter from Private Secretary—a *much* more important position and a much larger salary. I scarcely thought at first—you know, Gwendolen, he is young; and it does *not* do in these matters to be accused of nepotism, but I have, yes I almost *have*, decided to give him the Colonial Secretaryship."

"So he would go out with us in February?"

"Yes. And I quite agree with you that it would be very pretty to ask Judith Van Arnhem to go out with us for six months. It is so *very* much the thing now to go out to stay on long visits at these places—and the Wydgates have really been most hospitable!"

Whereby Lord Brailham meant to say, in his refined and indirect fashion, that Miss Van Arnhem had seven thousand a year, and that the ducal house of Ipswich was not, at that present, averse to any additional thousands that might accrue.

Miss Van Arnhem accepted this invitation readily, and it seemed likely that for some part of the journey out the O'Rorkes might also be travelling companions. For the late attaché at Brussels had been appointed a Secretary of Legation at Pekin, and it was proposed that they should all go by the same ship, as far as Bombay, where Lord Brailham's party was to be joined by his Excellency's nephew and A.D.C., Mr. Osric Beke, of the Blacks.

Ultimately when Lady Brailham, going ashore from the *Táj Mahâl*, caught sight of that officer standing on the stone steps of the Apollo Bunder and awaiting the boat's arrival, she overtook an expression in the eyes of Miss

Van Arnhem, who was sitting opposite, that explained the young lady's great readiness to come out and visit the East.

Lady Brailham liked Miss Van Arnhem, and it would have pleased her had a marriage been possible between Judith and his Excellency's Colonial Secretary; if not, she would by no means be displeased to hear of one with the same bride, but the Governor's A.D.C. as bridegroom.

Mrs. O'Rorke examined Mr. Beke with as keen a show of interest as her friend. They were both quick to notice the changes that there were.

He was still a tall, slight man, but there remained nothing boyishly slim about the slightness. It was only that he was a man scarcely likely ever to run to flesh. He was certainly broader across the shoulders than of old. The moustache was a little heavier and a little coarser. He was browner, and the steady, grey-blue eyes seemed something further back. Just over the ears on either side one or two lines of grey showed, if one looked carefully, among the close-cut, almost black hair. And the face was rather thin.

His welcome was very undemonstrative. He did not seem half so delighted to see them all

as Gerry O'Rorke was to see him. But in reality he was much more glad. He had never been so glad about anything since he had been in Asia.

He felt almost affectionate towards Bombay while doing the honours of it to these friends. Their presence gave it an interest it had always lacked.

As for Puzzle, he was bored by the advent of these people. He was rather suspicious of strangers, and not a little inclined to be jealous. With a swift instinct the old dog made up his mind to be more jealous of Miss Van Arnhem than of the others.

The stay at Bombay was not very long. Mr. Beke showed them the European city, and Parel, Malabar Hill, with its Towers of Silence, and the weird island of Elephanta; and after that they went away, still all together.

At Singapore they parted, the O'Rorkes sticking to the *Táj Mahâl*, Lord Brailham and his party landing. The new Governor had already arrived, and was installed in the huge palace with its creamy marble columns; so the ex-Governor did not linger. After half-a-dozen addresses, and three semi-state dinner-parties, they put to sea again, in a much less magnificent vessel this time, the *Sultan of*

Johore, bound for Borneo, the Philippines, and Port William—which is, as all the world knows, the capital of Salonga, the largest of the Samson Islands.

There were a good many other passengers, but the best cabins in the ship were reserved for his Excellency and his friends.

CHAPTER XXXVI

It was afternoon, and perhaps the sleepiest hour of the day.

But neither Mr. Beke nor Miss Van Arnhem were asleep—though the latter had been. Mr. Beke was on deck, walking up and down, and calculating how many times he would have to go to and fro to make a mile. Taking advantage of his absence Puzzle is about to jump upon his master's bed. He has been lying on the cabin floor: but it has latterly dissatisfied him. He has risen several times and, turning round once or twice, flopped down again on the same place. Now he stands up again and blinks reproachfully at the spot whence his head has just come, as if he would have thought better things of it. And finally he puts his forepaws on the edge of the berth and looks sentimentally at the place where he would like to lie.

He is a dog who almost always succumbs, ultimately, to temptation; but he seldom falls

without heart-searchings and some previous ineffectual resistance. As Gerry O'Rorke says, "human nature is the same everywhere," and poor rakish old Puzzle is terribly human.

Once curled up upon the bed he dozes, with an occasional dismal groan of still unquiet conscience.

Mr. Beke wonders where Judith is. And even while he wonders she appears.

"I have been asleep," she announces, "and I meant to have gone on ever so long. But I woke up, and then I heard you marching up and down.

"How did you know it was I?"

"My cabin is just under here, and I could recognize your step as plainly as possible."

For a minute or so they say no more: he has ceased his patrol and they are standing by the stanchions, leaning on them, and looking out across the blue-green sea.

"I am glad there is something to see again," she remarks presently.

For some hours the course has been through an archipelago of reef and islands.

"So am I. I get sick of the water only. Isn't it a wonderful colour?"

"Yes. I like it better than the absolute cobalt-blue of the Indian Ocean. What colour should you call it?"

He does not know. It is brilliantly blue one way and brilliantly green one way.

"It really is *two* colours," he says, "folded in and out. I wish one had counted the islands: that long one we are just overhauling must be about the twentieth."

They both look ahead towards the same point. The vessel is rapidly pulling up to a larger island than the rest, somewhat higher, though low enough. It is pretty in its way; of a rather monotonous tropical prettiness, he thinks.

"They're a sealed pattern," he observes, in his soldier language; "same outer reef, same inner lagoon, same line of yellow, then of red, then of green, then the row of palms with the sky showing through."

"They're all right to *look* at," she says. "I dare say they would pall if one had to stay a week on one."

"Or for ever," he suggests.

There is a fine healthy noise and rattle, a stiff breeze that is not hot comes straight ahead, and there is a whistle and clatter of ship noises. It is pleasant after the oily, tropic stillness of the last three days.

"Gerry O'Rorke and Freda seem a great success, don't they?" remarks the girl suddenly.

The long island is on their port bow now, a mile or so away.

"Yes. One could see that coming years ago."

She laughs.

"And yet all the same I once thought it would be *you*," she says.

He turns his back to the sea and looks down into her face.

"You did not think that long," he observes quietly.

"Oh, I don't know for how long—however, I was wrong, you see."

"Yes. If you ever thought that, you were wrong."

He says no more just then. And a sailor comes and dings away at a bell.

"Six bells! That's three o'clock, isn't it?"

"Yes. Judith!"

"Well."

"I labour under a disability."

"What is it?"

"The disability—inability, to make love."

He smiles, but his eyes are grave enough.

"Oh, do you?" she asks. "Not by all accounts."

She is almost frightened the moment the

words have slipped from her lips. He still looks down into her face, but his own has become rather hard.

"Listen," he says, coldly. "I was, as you know, beginning to say something which is to me at least important enough to make me serious."

"To make you scold!" she suggests, with a laugh that sounds not quite courageous.

He does not notice her interruption at all, but goes on.

"It seems to me," he says "that you have, or believe you have, something to accuse me of."

She looks straight up into his face, and finds it grave, not hard perhaps, but without softness; he is watching her with an undisguised, earnest interest; he is waiting for her to speak with a quiet patience. But he is not playing: and he will not play.

And, because she wants him, and because she is a real woman of flesh and blood and common sense, and not the perverse accomplice of a novelist who has to make three volumes, she answers truly.

"I have nothing at all to accuse you of," she replies, not dropping her eyes from his that search and hold them.

"If you have," he urges, "if there is anything that you are now determined to forget, but which, after all, you might remember later, say it now. For later, I would not listen."

His tone is masterful. And he does not care if it so sounds to her. He will be master always. And she understands, and does not disapprove. She has herself been always master hitherto; only *faute de mieux:* when her true master comes she will be glad enough.

She repeats her former assertion, still looking in his face.

"I thought," he says, "you might have heard things."

"I heard," she answers. "But I never believed. I do not think I ever even fancied that I believed."

His eyes are as steady as ever, but not so hard. And the coldness in his voice alters.

"I was beginning to say, just now," he tells her, "that I do not know how to make love: and that is a disability—a difficulty in the way of what I have to say."

"Why not say it without making love?"

"I am going to. If I wait till I have learned I may wait too long: and what I want to

ask for may have been taken by some one else."

He pauses and goes on—

"It is a long time that I have waited already, but that was for another reason. The thing that I wanted I could not ask for then—not until quite lately. Now that one can ask, it is stupid to delay."

He still looks down, and continues—

"One ought certainly to make love. It is rather brutal to be so direct as I am being; but to make love is beyond me. Perhaps it is beyond me to *be* in love, too. One does not know. It seems to me that *every one* cannot be quite as they are in books. So far I cannot be. But I want nothing in the world so much as to have you for my wife."

She is still silent, and he watches her with an earnestness that is oddly convincing.

"Are you *sure* you want to marry me?" she asks at last.

He does not answer.

"Are you sure that you want me to marry you?" she asked again.

"Yes," he says impatiently, "I am sure. So are you. You have known it for three years."

She looks out towards the long, low island, and a very peculiar noise begins along the

bottom of the ship, accompanied by a grating, disagreeable sensation.

"And will you?" he asks.

"Yes," she answers. "I suppose you have also known for three years that I would say that!"

CHAPTER XXXVII

It was four o'clock, but there was no sailor to come and strike eight bells. The two dog-watches would never be kept again on the *Sultan of Johore*.

Mr. Beke, of the Blacks, and Puzzle had the ship—what was left of it—all to themselves.

There had never been from the first the smallest hope of saving her ; and from the first there had been a horrible confusion. So large a number of the passengers had been asleep, and were roused only by the tearing noise as the luckless steamer scraped and dashed herself upon the sunken reef. Dazed and stupid, they joined in the mad rush for the boats.

As is usual, the boat accommodation was dreadfully inadequate ; and the boats were almost hopelessly crowded. Crew and passengers, fore and aft together, were bundled indiscriminately into them.

Crowded as they were, Mr. Beke would have taken his chance of safety in one of them with the rest ; but, just as he had done so, he

remembered Puzzle, and he leapt on board again.

To reach his own cabin was a very difficult, almost impossible task, but he did it at last; and arriving there he found it locked.

It was the ship's rule that cabin-doors were always to be locked in the absence of their occupants, and the key hung upon a numbered rack in the saloon.

To get up to the saloon was even more difficult than it had been to come down. But it was done; and then Osric went down again to the cabin.

The gangway by this time was up to his breast in water and full of wreckage, which made it ever so hard to get along.

Old Puzzle was clinging with his forepaws to the vacant upper berth; for the A.D.C. had his cabin to himself. The rest of his body was in the water. It was evident that he had known what his master was doing to rescue him; and all the while he had not whined.

When together they reached the deck the boats were disappearing round the corner of the reef that surrounded the long island. It appeared to have no opening on this side, and all had therefore shaped a course which would speedily get them to the other side; one had disappeared already; possibly it had capsized,

for they were all overloaded and the sea was, comparatively, rough.

In a few minutes all the boats had disappeared, and even during those few minutes the ship herself had sunk perceptibly deeper.

Osric had hailed the boats once or twice before they passed out of sight; but with no practical hope of their hearing. He does not in the least blame them, nor does he accuse Puzzle as the cause of their common catastrophe. It is part of the real largeness of his disposition that he is very little prone to accusations or blame. Such he resents himself, and he has never had the feeble habit of indulging in them.

But he has now no illusions. It would be wrong to say he has no hope, for the negation of all hope is despair, and he is unassailed by despair. He merely relinquishes any practical expectation of life.

A very good swimmer might reach the reef; but he is only a fairly good swimmer, and he knows that this sea abounds with sharks. Many have been seen within the last two days, and he has seen one even since he and Puzzle came on deck. Of course the party in the boats must ultimately miss him, and after landing the rest they would of course send back to look for him. But that must, almost certainly, be too late.

The ship is not foundering in shallow water; she is gradually but steadily slipping back off the reef; and she will sink then in scores of fathoms.

No one has ever doubted Osric's courage, though some have said he never would really make a soldier. But a special quality of courage is needed for this present task of his—to wait calmly and alone, for the inevitable coming of death.

He has no "gallery," as in the old days Mrs. Freke would have said. There are none to hear him if he would cry, none to watch his face; but he holds himself as though there were. He is his own witness, and he has never made little of his own testimony to himself.

He stands by the stanchion where, an hour ago, he and Judith stood together. And he certainly remembers that and what they had said. He is wholly alive to the largeness of what he is losing; his future great position, the life of all lives he would have chosen. He knows that the name he carries has not suffered in his keeping.

He stares out at yonder foolish island, with its unfamiliar tropic beauty; and his thoughts pass from it backwards across the world to home and England, Rentshire and Eresby.

He lifts little Puzzle in his arms, and the dog

squats, leant against his master on the stanchion. The young man's thoughts are far from Asia, and this sunlit, empty sea. He is a man entirely free from affectations, and he knows that he is dear to many ; he wishes his death might bring less sorrow than it must.

All sorts of trivial incidents of childhood come crowding out of the past when he and his brothers and sisters were at home together ; and things his uncle has said, or his mother.

Suddenly the sinking ship gives a lurch to starboard, and Osric is almost overbalanced into the sea. He saves himself, but Puzzle falls, and in a moment the poor old dog is struggling in the water. He does not whine even now ; he is a gentleman to his tough old heart, and if he is to die he will die game. As he lifts his battered head out of the water Osric sees upon his face an agonized expression of appeal. Some instinct, thousands of years old, tells him what there is in the water.

" Puzzle, don't be a fool," remarks his master.

A fool to suppose that he would be left to that horrible fate alone.

They must both soon be dead. But not therefore shall one die first, and dreadfully, unfriended by the other. In a moment Osric has leapt into the sea ; in very few moments more both are back on deck.

Poor old Puzzle! he is not an eloquent dog, or one much given to sentiment. But there is a look in his faded old eyes that Osric finds it hard to face; a look of gratitude that says, "I knew you were a gentleman. I never thought you'd leave me to my fate."

"For heaven's sake, Puzzle," remarks Osric, "don't let us begin to gush."

All the same he sits down and lets the old dog creep close into his lap.

"It's a bore for you, Puzzle," says Osric, "that you have to come too."

Perhaps Puzzle understands. He creeps a trifle closer and licks his master's hand, giving his unhandsome old tail a slight wag, as if to say that he would rather not be left behind.

And does Osric, thus facing death, think nothing of God, and the things that come after death?

Yes; but not otherwise than he has thought in life.

He has always believed the old teachings, so far as he has been able to understand them, in a plain fashion of his own. And, not emotionally, he has tried to walk beside them. He believes in God, and that in a few minutes of our earthly time, he and the Judge will face each other.

But he is not afraid. He has heard much of the kindness of the Judge; and he cannot see why a kind justice should condemn him. And so he too lifts the dark curtain that hangs athwart the portals of death, and passes out, not ignobly, not without regrets, from this warm life of ours, into the still palace of the Silent King.

His grave, on the unresting bosom of the sea-floor, there is nought to mark; and this trivial telling of his tale by me, who was his friend, is all his monument! But nay, it is not. His greater monument is in the memory of those who loved him.

In truth, thus dying he climbed into a throne that nothing but death can give us. Where would Mary Stuart be, or Louis the Sixteenth and his queen, if it were not for the block at Fotheringay, the guillotine in the Place of the Revolution?

All things get known at last, and so did the fact of the manner of his death.

Bertie Fane heard in the gardens of the Bund at Poona, in the midst of that smart crowd that Mr. Beke had never liked. And hearing he turned, with a horrible choking in his throat, and walked silent and alone to the gate. He jumped into his cart and drove back to his bungalow—and there he wrote: writing also to

his dead friend's mother, for which she ever loved him.

And after mess that night Mr. Beke's colonel made a little speech, and they drank, in silence, to the memory of their dead comrade.

Mrs. Jervis, once Mrs. Freke, was all alone, after dinner, in her bungalow when she read of it at Katara, in the Deccan. And her big, and ever rather easy, tears splattered down upon the crumpled newspaper.

"Ah well!" she says, "he was many pegs above me. And I was a fool ever to think of it. But I shall always like him, and be glad that we were friends for a while . . . perhaps, if at the start I had known a man like him things might have gone differently. I never had any other *friend*."

"Oh, Gerry," cried Freda O'Rorke, when he told her, her voice all full of tears, "I *did* like him. Poor Judy, poor Judy! Gerry, if he would have liked me as much as I could have liked him perhaps I would never have liked you at all."

"'Deed then," says Gerry sadly, "he was much too good a chap."

At home in England old Lord Wydgate creeps about the gardens, and the parish, much older; straining his ears for the echoes of a voice that had fallen into the Great Silence.

He too has an old-fashioned faith and trust in God; he makes no railing against His heavy decree; but, like the poor Hebrew king, he whispers to his heart, "I shall go to him; but he shall not return to me."

And the young man's mother? Into the matter of her sorrow let us not thrust inquiry. That was her secret, between her hurt soul and God. *Abyssus abyssum invocat* . . . the deep of her poor human heart cries out upon the great deeps of the heart of God. . . .

THE END

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